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SUMMER 1985

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NIGHT CRY

SUMMER 1985

Rod Serling's
THE **TWILIGHT ZONE** Magazine

PRESENTS

14 Tales
of Spellbinding Horror

With 10 Illustrations by Frances Jetter

Montcalm Publishing Corporation
New York, New York

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Original appearances in Rod Serling's *The Twilight Zone Magazine*: *The Death Runner* by Thomas Sullivan, April 1981; *Food, Gas, Lodging* by Craig W. Anderson, July 1982; *The Ash-Tree* by M. R. James, December 1981; *Zombies* by Dolly Ogawa, June 1982; *Cruising* by Donald Tyson, September 1982; *The Thing from the Slush* by George Alec Effinger, April 1982; *W.S.* by L. P. Hartley, December 1982, © 1973 by the estate of L. P. Hartley—reprinted from *The Complete Stories of L. P. Hartley* (London, Hamish Hamilton, Ltd.); *The New Man* by Barbara Owens, March 1982; *Scenicruiser and the Silver Lady* by Peter S. Alterman, June 1981; *Hell Is Murky* by John Alfred Taylor, November 1982.

The following stories are previously unpublished and appear in this issue of *Night Cry* for the first time anywhere: *The Dark* by Benjamin Gleisser, *Bugs* by Larry Tritten, *Worms from Mars* by Augustine Funnell, and *Four Days Before the Snow* by A. R. Morlan.

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Night Cry, Summer, 1985, Volume 1, Number 2, is published quarterly (4 times per year) in the United States and simultaneously in Canada by TZ Publications, a division of Montcalm Publishing Corporation, 800 Second Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017. Telephone (212) 986-9600. Copyright © 1985 by TZ Publications. *Night Cry* is published pursuant to a license from Carolyn Serling and Viacom Enterprises, a division of Viacom International, Inc. All rights reserved. Return postage must accompany all unsolicited material. The publisher assumes no responsibility for care and return of unsolicited materials. All rights reserved on material accepted for publication unless otherwise specified. All letters sent to *Night Cry* or to its editors are assumed intended for publication. Nothing may be reproduced in whole or in part without written permission from the publishers. Any similarity between persons appearing in fiction and real persons living or dead is coincidental. Single copies \$2.95 in U.S., \$3.50 in Canada. Printed in U.S.A.

From the Editor

I got the shock of my life last night.

Mind you, I don't shock easily. As the editor of a horror magazine, I'm accustomed to sharing my morning coffee with axe murderers and ghouls. I no longer blanch at human sacrifices, alien invasions, or cases of demonic possession. I fall asleep at night over tales of giant man-eating slugs, with nary a bad dream.

But last night I read something that shocked me.

It was this issue of *Night Cry*.

I'm not saying my blood ran cold, exactly, or that my hair stood on end; after all, I had read each one of these tales before. (First-time readers should prove a lot more susceptible.)

Rather, I was shocked by how consistently *good* the stories are. I'm not kidding. It's downright uncanny.

Like the hero of George Alec Effinger's *The Thing from the Slush*, I've read enough over-the-transom submissions—and enough anthologies, prize-winning stories, and accepted horror “classics”—to know the truth of that famous law promulgated by Theodore Sturgeon: that ninety percent of everything is crap. Over the past four years, in search of material for *Twilight Zone*, I've pored through the collected works of the acknowledged masters of the genre, from Benson and Blackwood to Hodgson, Whitehead, and Dahl; and even among so exalted a crew, with near-Sturgeonian frequency, the misses far outnumber the hits.

The same goes for anthologies. Curmudgeonly as this may sound, if I can find just two or three stories in a dozen that are clever and decently written, I consider myself ahead of the game.

That's why this present collection surprised me. In gathering the stories for it, many of them from early issues of TZ, I'd completely forgotten just how strong they are.

Not only the old-time favorites like W.S. and *The Ash-Tree*, but modern tales such as John Alfred Taylor's *Hell Is Murky*, with its L.A.-wide vision of helplessness and doom; the rocker's-eye-view satire of Dolly Ogawa's *Zombies*; and Thomas Sullivan's *The Death Runner*, surely the ultimate jogging story (a more popular form than you might imagine). Peter S. Alterman's *Scenicruiser and the Silver Lady* movingly evokes the loneliness of the night-shrouded American highway; *Cruising*, by Donald Tyson, turns a common highway encounter into devastating horror; and Craig W. Anderson's *Food, Gas, Lodging* shows what may lie in wait for you at the highway's end. Barbara Owens's *The New Man*, a memorably disturbing foray into madness, has already been dramatized as the premiere episode of the tv series *Tales from the Darkside*.

This issue's four new stories make for an even stronger brew: *Worms from Mars*, by Augustine Funnell, in which humanity encounters some truly horrifying crawly things; *Bugs*, a nasty piece of work by Larry Tritten, in which the crawly things aren't half as bad as the humans; *The Dark*, a professional first by Benjamin Gleisser, in which, down shadowy hospital corridors, it gets increasingly hard to tell the humans and crawlies apart; and another professional debut, *Four Days Before the Snow* by A.R. Morlan, a powerful novelette on a controversial subject, in which the crawly things come from—of all places—within us.

They're lawbreakers, these stories, every one of them. They thumb their pretty noses at Sturgeon's Law, and there isn't a dud in the bunch. I warn you, it's positively shocking.

—TK

Scenicruiser and the Silver Lady

by PETER S. ALTERMAN

A journey through the night-side of America,
featuring a blonde . . . a baseball star . . .
and a fatally erotic encounter just off
the highway to eternity.

How many single-car accidents occur in the middle of the night on deserted roads? Mothers with children asleep in the back seat, having taken no liquor or drugs, all of a sudden flip their Pintos and die on steel pyres. Is it the car? The driver, lulled to sleep behind the wheel by the evangelist from Austin, Texas, on the radio? Or is it that the land reaches out and shoves the road, brushes at the cars which crawl through the branded wrinkles on its face?

I know.

You may remember me; they called me the Scenicruiser. I pitched for the New York Mets. Now I drive the Interstate at night. Alone. And every night I meet the same silver and chrome Chrysler Cordoba. She enters the on-ramp; every night I refuse her the highway; I run her off the road; I smash her. As I whip past, I catch a glimpse of the car tipping over, bouncing on the side of its fender, spinning like a broken wagon wheel. As I speed away, the first plume of flame, yellow against the stormy sky, erupts from the highway, a beacon which shrinks away to a pinpoint in the rear-view mirror, then disappears completely into the night.

Late at night the road belongs to an occasional semi-rig, a rare passenger car, and me. The land is dark, so dark that there is no line between the sky and the dense woods bordering the road. It is black; it is humid. The air lies on the ground like a hen over chicks, blood-warm and smothering.

Nobody can sit alone by the side of that road for long; soon

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there is the need to drive. Then tires hum against pasty black asphalt; rubber squeezes tar in its molecular embrace, then looses and spins away, each touch sucking a bit of tar from the roadway, each parting tearing a bit of rubber from the tire.

Lovers do not cease loving; they wear away the love with constant use, as a pitcher wears away his ability with use. That's how I learned what I know.

The first time the Cordoba rolled up on me, I pulled over to let her in. She was a beauty, her silver sides polished till they gleamed, the chrome a whiter shade at the edges of the doors and fenders. The red taillights, amber sidelights, and blue-white headlights made her look like a bizarre deep-water monster, one of those fish with no eyes and with lights dangling from its spiny ridges.

The Cordoba came up fast on my right side. She had an orange I ♥ NY sticker on the trunk where the license plate should have been. A couple sat close together in the car; they were probably lovers. I slid over into the left lane, giving her room to enter, but she shot across the highway toward me. At the last moment, she relented a tiny bit, enough for me to avoid her.

The glare of her taillights burned like blood in my eyes. I screamed, outraged, as I mashed the brake. The right front fender of my Pontiac banged against the concrete center barrier, pleating and slashing the front tire. The wheel shook my hands, rattling my arms.

Fear and rage burst through me. I howled; I cursed. Foam collected at the corners of my mouth as I damned the disappearing Cordoba. I beat my fists against the steering wheel. Only the damage to my car kept me from chasing that silver demon and running her into a ditch.

I clattered to a halt against the divider and crawled out to look at the damage. The fender had crumpled inward, bending against the concrete, and had turned a sharp edge against the tire, like a lathe chisel on turning wood. I went around the back and opened the trunk with shaking hands.

It was there, standing behind my car, looking back at the rubber marks on the asphalt, that I first felt the hatred of the land. The random violence of the attack unnerved me in the same way that any random violence does.

It breaks the rhythm.

When I was still in high school, I learned about rhythm and wear. Every night before I pitched, I'd take my father's car out and

drive. Not with my girlfriend Mary Ann, or even with any of the other players. Just me and the car, a 1958 Pontiac, the one with the row of stars along the sides of the tailfins. Sitting there behind the wheel with the engine throbbing against my thighs, I rolled through the night listening to XERF pump Chuck Berry and Jesus through the hiss and fade of the stars.

That's where I got the name Scenicruiser. When Mary Ann asked me what I did on the road, I tried to explain. Then I told her I drove to look at the scenery. She understood that a lot better. The nickname stuck; Mary Ann didn't.

My shoulder eventually loosened with no special injury except age. It happens. The pinpoint accuracy blurred. There were too many walks; there was too little margin for error at the corners. Batters started hitting me as I compensated and pitched for the center of the plate. The curve, my big roundhouse curve, sometimes flew away, or worse, hung high, a fat home run offered.

After the games the self-loathing and fear were almost too much to bear. I soothed them the only way I knew how. I took the Firebird out of the basement garage, pointed it down the FDR Drive, and followed the road, looking for that fickle rhythm.

Mary Ann took the kids and left. She said there was no use in trying to keep up the marriage with me on the road so much, and riding the highways all night when I was home.

When my pitching career was over, I had lots of money and nothing to do.

So I rode the Interstates.

A state trooper pulled up behind me as I worked on the car and made out an accident report. When he asked me the license number of the Cordoba, I told him "I love New York." He looked at me blankly. I explained; he shook his head. Then he took my driver's license and asked me to take a breathalyzer test.

When he was satisfied that I wasn't drunk or drugged, he directed me to the next stop, where I could buy a new tire and get home. My spare was one of those tiny ones only good for a few miles at a time.

While a mechanic mounted the new tire, I wandered into the restaurant to buy a cup of coffee. There were five other people in there: a waitress dressed in faded Howard Johnson pink with a stained white half-apron, a big, sweaty black behind the grill in soiled whites, a pair of kid truckers hovering over cups of coffee in one of the booths while waiting for their uppers to kick in.

And the blonde.

She was in a corner booth, her platinum hair piled like cotton candy over her pale face. She could have come right from the Miss Oklahoma pageant. She had an open, regular face, just beginning to fall the smallest bit. Her smile hovered on the verge of lust.

She was wearing a white sequined sweater over a white tank top. A nipple stood out, thick beneath the stretch material. Around her wrist was a silver bracelet; silver wire earrings dangled from her earlobes like flattened teardrops—or tiny nooses. She sat with a bowl of chili and a beer in front of her and stared out the broad panes of glass at the empty highway. A diabetic's kit lay open beside her glass: a small vial, cotton swabs, and a thin, shiny steel syringe nestled in black velvet. Maybe she was waiting for someone; maybe she was hoping someone would come by. A silver lady.

I slid onto a stool at the counter and nodded at the waitress. She drew a cup of coffee without my saying anything and brought it over to me.

"Wanna see a menu?" she asked, but she knew I didn't; she didn't even carry one. Her voice was tired; her feet were probably killing her, and she probably had three kids waiting for her down the road in an apartment too small for one. Most likely her husband was an independent trucker who hadn't been home in a couple of years. Every time someone came through the restaurant door she looked up, half-expecting it to be him, praying it would be him, to lean over the counter and lift her out from behind. He never would, but it was too late for her anyway. She was mated to the rhythm of the highway.

I shook my head. "Want cream? Sugar?" I smiled and sipped the steaming liquid. *Rose* was embossed on her name tag. "Storm's comin'," she said.

She wanted to talk. "Been working here long, Rose?" I asked.

"Long enough." She tucked her blouse back into her apron and leaned pudgy elbows on the counter beside me. "What happened to you?" She pointed to my black, greasy hands and the sleeve torn on the fender.

As I told her the story, her face clouded and her eyes wandered away from mine nervously. The blonde was staring intently at us; as our eyes met she turned away.

Rose pushed herself away from the counter and drew a cleaning rag from behind the bar. "No. I ain't seen a silver Cordoba."



She shook her head, more to herself than to me. "After a while you don't even see 'em go by." Then she walked back to the grill.

She had wanted to talk, and then something had stopped her. I wanted to know what. I looked back at the blonde, but she was staring out at the empty highway.

"You got any kids?" I called down the counter.

She looked back at me, surprised. Suspicion hooded her eyes. The black leaned over the counter to fix me with his stare.

"Yeah. Two. Why?"

I smile innocently. "Any boys?"

She scowled. "Yeah. Both of 'em. What you want to know for?"

I slid off the stool. "Warm this up for me," I said, pointing to the cup, "and I'll be back to show you." I had a baseball in the trunk of my car. An autographed baseball for her kids was just what I needed to loosen her up again.

Steam was rising from the cup when I returned; everybody in the place was watching me. I grinned a goofy grin I didn't feel and sat down. I pulled out a felt-tip and poised it over the ball. "What're their names? I'll autograph a ball for them," I said, laying on my deepest Okie accent.

It worked. She came over. "Eugene Junior and Walter. You a ballplayer?"

"A pitcher. Used to be," I said. Everyone went back to his own business. Ex-ballplayers are common in New Jersey. And Oklahoma. I signed the ball to Eugene Junior and Walter, with best regards.

She took the ball and read, then looked up at me. "Hey, I saw you pitch once, at Shea." I could predict the rest. "'Course, that was years ago. Eugene Senior took us to all the games. He was a Met fan," she explained, and pushed a strand of brown hair back under her crumpled paper tiara. I nodded. "But he died two years ago May. I still call the boy Junior; it keeps his father alive a little for him." She hadn't called him her husband, but the boy's father: what emptiness in that. Pain gathered in wrinkles around her eyes.

Suddenly, I didn't want to ask her any more questions. I dropped a bill on the counter and stood up. "Well, they must be done with my car by now," I said. She looked disappointed.

Leaning over, she slid the bill into her pocket and spoke low. "Coffee's on me. And hey, about that Cordoba? Comes by here regular. But only in the middle of the night." Then she stood up

and started wiping the counter. "Thanks for the ball. See ya."

I waved to her and looked back at the blonde as I walked out the door. The moon was shining in through the side window, its pale glow bleaching out the hollows of her cheeks and eyes. I had named her rightly—the Silver Lady. She wasn't looking at me, but she was watching me the way a good pitcher measures a base runner's lead without seeming to see him.

The next night I drove the Pike from the city down to the Delaware Memorial Bridge. The storm system had cleared out but another one was trailing at its heels, about to hit. There was little traffic and the lane dividers flashed stroboscopically in the glare of my headlights. The sounds of night driving filled the car, WWVA strong and clear through the fading AM stations, succumbing only to static crashes. My body settled into the familiar rhythm, the growl of the tires on the road the velocity of my life.

We rolled through the night, accompanied by an occasional neighbor cruising past at his own rhythm, headlights flashing up and down. There was a blur as he passed, followed by the winking red taillight which slid in front of me, then slowly pulled away, swallowed up by distance and darkness. The turnpike was quiet, the land passive; no silver Cordoba rushed at me.

At the final toll apron I turned around and drove back north, toward New York. Time circled the night in harmony with the steady rumble of the tires and the measured flash of the lane dividers.

The road was completely empty except for us. Outside, the dark woods loomed over the roadway, barely distinguishable from the sooty sky. The Firebird rolled along, synchronized to the rhythm of my lazy thoughts. As I passed the restaurant across the highway, I was sure I saw the silver Cordoba parked out front.

At the next exit, I rammed a five at the toll-keeper and drove past him, not waiting for my change. I circled the booth and drove through the entrance, ripping a ticket from the automatic dispenser and almost smashing through the slow-rising gate. As I careened across the on-ramp, I could see the astonished toll-keeper standing beside his booth, my change in his hands, staring after me.

The road felt unstable under my wheels, as though the asphalt had melted in the heat of my blood and was slipping under the weight of my rolling tires. At the same time the melted tar grabbed at the rubber, trying to keep me from the Cordoba. The steering

wheel was mushy in my hands, and the engine's note was hoarse and irregular.

There were no cars parked in front of the restaurant when I got there. I banged into the room. Rose was behind the counter piling dirty dishes into a plastic tub. She looked up when I came in and poured a cup of coffee for me. She set it down in front of her.

"Was it here?" I said. My anger drained away before her.

She shook her head. "No, not tonight." Her eyes went to the highway. I slid onto the stool before her and picked up the steaming cup. "The boys really loved the baseball," she said.

I nodded and wondered why I was out there, chasing a strange car. "I thought I saw it parked out front before," I said. There was nothing else for me to do, and this was something worth doing. Who broke the highway motion? Who violated that utterly man-made rhythm? I had to know. And after years alone, sympathy for Rose . . .

"It's calm out there," she said.

"Yeah. But there's a storm growing, I can feel it."

In the background, the AM radio's tinny voice predicted thunderstorms along the southern coast of New Jersey and into Philadelphia. I had the feeling that I used to have in the middle of the eighth, when the head of the lineup was due and the score was tied—like the chop in the air just before landing which throws a plane around. My stomach trembled.

"It's like the night Eugene died," she said. I turned around on the stool and watched the road with her. Maybe I didn't want to look into those empty eyes. They carried an implied appeal. We were both victims of the highways. Her rhythm was mine.

She was silent for a long time. The air conditioner pumped chilled Jersey air into the room, cool but wet, carrying the dead smell of the pine barrens past the refrigeration coils and the dust filters. "Night just like this," she repeated. "Hauling a load of chemical fertilizer. From upstate. Clear, but a storm front was comin' in from the Lakes. There was nobody on the road with him. Grade was smooth and the roadbed clear. The patrol told me he musta fallen asleep and missed the curve. He was gonna stop here and pick me up." She turned away from the window. I watched her face. "The stuff went up like gasoline." She sighed deep in her throat, where the tears could be cut off with a squeeze. "Burned for hours. Like that plane that crashed." I could see the dead ashes of the truck in her eyes, a flat black which would not reflect light.

She turned her haunted eyes to me. "But he never took drugs, and was only on the road for six hours."

I shook my head sadly. At least I could take them to a game, Rose and her kids. Newborn thunder muttered against the glass panes.

The Silver Lady walked into the restaurant. She didn't seem surprised to see me. We nodded to her, Rose and I, as she walked over to her booth. Our conversation collapsed. The promise of lightning flickered behind the clouding sky.

Her hair was tousled by the wind, and the chains around her neck flashed in the fluorescent lights. Dark blood discolored the skin under her eyes. She had been out in the birthing of the storm, and it had left its mark on her. Rose went over to her with a menu and a pot of coffee. The Silver Lady took the coffee and waved the menu away. She stared out the window at the storm rolling down the highway.

It broke in waves of hard rain, and no sooner did it smack into the glass than the lights of the gas station next door were running across the slick asphalt. The rain beat against the roof of the restaurant and whipped the surrounding trees against the building. Water sheeted down the glass panes.

Bright yellow lights spilled across the road; the wrecker was pulling out. I walked over to the windows in time to see smeared red taillights pulling away. A police cruiser, dome lights flashing red, raced by on the highway, its banshee siren howling through the storm. Somewhere on the turnpike someone was dying.

It could have been me.

The Silver Lady turned from the window to look up at me. Her eyes were alive in the wild light. A smile played around her mouth and her nostrils flared with excitement. "Do you like the rain?" she said. Her voice was low, filled with whispers of the wind; it rustled in my ears, full of aching emptiness and time, full of loss and power.

I nodded.

"I love the storms," she said. "I love the way they sweep the highway." She cocked her head to the sound of something I could never hear. "They clean the road."

I sipped lukewarm coffee. She pulled her white sweater closer around her shoulders and looked at me. "I don't think my ride is going to make it tonight. Would you mind dropping me home? I only live a short way from here. Normally I'd walk, but the storm . . ."

She gestured at the window.

I usually don't pick up women along the road. But there was something compelling about her voice. I had to know her. Rose looked at me, sudden tears in her eyes.

I wanted to explain. It wasn't a fair comparison she thought I was making. This Silver Lady was raw energy, something elemental. My response was more complex than desire. I had no alternative but to respond, even against my will. "Hey, Rose," I said, taking out a dollar bill. "You off Sunday?"

She looked up, confused, and nodded once, quickly.

"There's a game at Shea Sunday. The Astros. Let's take your kids and go." I left before the surprise on her face could disperse to rejection.

We left the restaurant together, the Silver Lady and I, running through the rain to my car. She held her sweater over her head like a newspaper. The rain plastered her blouse against her loose breasts as I fumbled with the door lock. From behind the speckled window, Rose stared out at us.

The storm had transformed the highway. The landmarks I was familiar with were lost behind the windshield wipers and the heavy downpour. It was as though the night and the storm had sucked the illumination from the car's headlights.

I asked her her name and where she lived. I asked her who she was waiting for. She leaned against me, her wet breasts pressed against my side. The Silver Lady pointed down the road and said she had been waiting for me.

I started to ask her something else, but she put a hand behind my neck and kissed me, pulling my eyes away from the road.

That kiss burned like fire; it sent a thrill through me I hadn't felt in years. She nibbled on my lip and pressed her tongue deep into my mouth. The cool touch of her fingers was a narcotic in the night.

The car slewed on the slick asphalt; I pulled away from her and righted the skidding car. My breath came heavy, terror mixed with passion. I laughed shakily in the silence. Through the rest of the ride she sat beside me, her fingers laid lightly on my thigh, while I drove through the storm.

She pointed out an exit I hadn't noticed coming up. The storm, I thought. Then a tollbooth appeared at the end of the broad curve, and I was reassured. The Silver Lady directed me to a dark street right off the exit.

Her house was dark, in the middle of woods which ran right up to the dirt road. I pulled into the driveway at her direction and bounced through a deep puddle, splashing mud over the hood and onto the windshield. As my headlights swept around, I caught a glimmer of chrome bumper on the car parked in front of her house.

Her hand on the door latch, she said, "Come on in," and ran from the Pontiac into her house. But first I had to check her car, so I ran around the front of the house in the driving rain. It was parked wrong-way on the side of the road, a Fairmount with a New Jersey plate nestled on its trunk.

She was waiting for me at the front door, a candle in her hand, smiling. "The power is off," she said. I grinned and stepped into the dry, cool house. It was old, a two-story house, the kind they don't build in modern suburbs. And then she was in my arms.

We were soaking wet, but the warmth of her body overwhelmed the drying chill. As soon as she was sure I was interested, she pulled away and handed me a towel. She took another one and ran it through her hair.

I hadn't expected any romance from her; I wasn't disappointed.

She said, "Why don't you take off those wet clothes?" and unfastened her skirt. It slid to the floor around her feet. The Silver Lady reached out and pulled me to her, then unbuttoned my shirt. She laughed at my heat. My hands reached for her and her laugh turned into a deep, long groan.

Her body was hard; her steel fingers dug into my buttocks as she banged against me, rhythm crossing rhythm. We heaved against each other, never synchronizing, like alien wave fronts beating against each other, building dissonances.

Her coming caught me by surprise; she crushed me to her and turned her face aside, spending herself in isolation from me. Possession was all, for her. She barely acknowledged my own release. While I slept she must have mounted me several times; I awoke beneath and within her, feeling years older, desire unimaginable.

Some mornings there is no sunrise. When I left the house it was still dark and still raining. I left knowing no more about her than her body. She was cold heat; she took and gave carelessly, exhaustion and release.

The Firebird wouldn't start. I sat behind the wheel in her driveway, cranking the engine until the battery died. Water must have soaked the wires. Around me the darkness was a shiny black

carapace. She ran out to the car, a slicker held over her head, and stood at my window.

"Come on," she said. "I'll drive you to the stop on the Turnpike. You can get a mechanic back here to start you." Cold. Like that. She didn't offer to let me stay out the storm. But then, I wouldn't have. She knew the signs, too.

I clambered out of the Firebird and followed her to her car. She leaned across the seat, unlocking the door for me. I slid into its black velour cocoon.

The car was a silver Cordoba.

I should have known.

I wanted to get out; I wanted to walk in the rain to a paved road and pick up a ride, but I couldn't move. Her opium fingers held me in place effortlessly. Gravel crunched under the tires and the exhaust beat against my eardrums. Although she was invisible in the shadowed blackness of the car, I could feel and hear her.

She patted my cheek with a steely hand and smiled. "Don't worry, dear," she said. "I know these roads well. They're old acquaintances."

Overhead the trees waved wildly in the storm, their branches knitting the form of the Silver Lady. She flickered into shape within the dark car at the command of the branches, a vicious siren with an appetite for carrion. I watched her take form before my eyes, heard the malevolent moaning of the trees as they breathed the illusion of life into her.

Lightning flickered, and in its blue flashes I saw her fairly for the first time. Her limbs were gnarled, her joints polished mahogany. The fingers which gripped the steering wheel were choking vines; her silver clothes were ancient gauze stained here and there with the sienna of old blood. Her breathing was the cold rustle of dead leaves blown before a storm, and the light in her eyes was the false passion of November moonlight.

Her pale face was worn concrete, crumbling under the sun, her eyes the mud color of oil-stained gravel. Black grease formed crescent moons under the fingernails which clenched my arm. This animate marionette was the Silver Lady.

I knew her at that moment. She saw it and turned away, unable to bear the recognition in my eyes. But I had succeeded in seeing what she was, had discovered the unconscious of that land and that highway.

I screamed soundlessly in the car. Her morphine grin spread;

the woods outside suckled on my terror.

I didn't see much of that ride, and what I did see I'll try to forget for the rest of my life, though that is impossible.

She drove like a madwoman, taking curves at the limit of the tires' ability to hold the road, and beyond, into sickening, oscillating skids. The engine roared a constant moaning protest as she attracted the roadway with her car. She drove to a different access than the one we had come through before. The automatic ticket gate was open and she sped through, slewing slightly over the steel plate beneath the dispenser. Rain beat against the highway with its palms.

As she raced down the on-ramp, I saw my blue Firebird rolling along smoothly in the right lane, glistening in the rain. The Silver Lady grinned a deadly grin as she accelerated to cut me off.

The Firebird saw us coming and slid into the left lane, giving us room to enter. She laughed at the courtesy, knowing my heart. The storm and the night were in that laugh; the angry wind through the violated land was in her throat.

She slewed the Cordoba onto the Turnpike, crossing the right lane in flash. There was a moment of glaring lights and screaming tires. The wet road bled light in my eyes. I tried to pull the steering wheel away from her, but she held it in a death-grip. It was like trying to drag a marble block across a beach. I dug my heels in against the transmission hump and pulled at the wheel until I thought the muscles in my arms would burst. But I moved it.

There was a screech of flayed metal behind us as the Firebird ran against the concrete center divider, sparks spraying off its mangled fender. In the rearview mirror I saw it come to a stop, one headlight following us down the highway, the other crumpled within the fender, its beam pointing up into the night sky.

The Silver Lady chuckled deep in her throat as we drove away. She leaned over and touched me on the neck. "So you really don't want to stay with me, do you?" She shook her platinum hair, bemused.

Then I remember the car entering a long, gentle curve. I remember the tractor rig climbing slowly to top gear; I glimpsed the flammable warning diamonds on its rear doors, under the neat lettering, "Winston and Sons." At the heart of the curve, the Cordoba leapt from hiding behind it and cut in front of the semi's huge front grill. The driver stared down at us with terrified eyes and yanked

his wheel frantically to avoid smashing into the flank of the Cordoba. Painted under the open window was the name *Eugene*.

The cab hit the curb, bounced up once like a toy and broke its spine. The trailer behind slammed through the back of the cab, igniting the fuel tanks slung low beneath it. The cab blew apart in a bright orange ball. Eugene blew apart.

But that wasn't enough for her. She had to show me how completely she hated us, and how powerful she was. As we screamed away, the fertilizer exploded with a muffled *crump*. The explosion towered up to the clouds, casting its blood-black glare across the Turnpike. The blasted corpse of the trailer shriveled in the fire.

She slowed the car and stopped at the side of the road in the darkness, past sight of the pyre. She leaned across me and pushed my door open. The sounds of the night spilled in, the hiss of rain on the asphalt, the rustle of leaves swaying in the wind. A long sigh, hollow and dank, pushed me from the car. I stumbled to my knees on the wet road and looked up to see the taillights on the Cordoba disappearing down the slick highway. Far away, sirens wailed.

I walked in the diminishing rain for miles; overhead the hostile boughs whipped by my head, spattering me with water. A state patrol car raced by on the other side of the road. Its siren pierced my skull, an amalgam of all the death-screams ever heard on that highway. Shortly afterward, a wrecker rolled by, its orange dome light flickering steadily. Without the benefit of a siren, it seemed to growl past slowly.

I was thoroughly soaked and chilled by the time I arrived at the rest stop. The parking lot was empty and the rain was only a sprinkle against the heavy wet cotton of my shirt. There were five people in the restaurant: two kids hunched over cups of coffee in a back booth, the black behind the grill, Rose—and the Silver Lady. As I approached, I saw her studying the truckers. She spread the hypodermic kit out on the table before her while seeming to measure the lives of the kids.

Then she looked out and saw me. And smiled. I began to shake with terror. But before I could reach the doors to the restaurant, I saw myself walk into the room, shirt cuff torn, hands grimy.

The Silver Lady had trapped me. Diana, too, had taken revenge for the stolen vision of her nakedness.

I pounded on the window, but nobody heard me. I screamed to Rose, but she was busy leaning over the counter talking to me. Finally, I just watched as the past replayed itself. The Silver Lady

watched me clinically, harvesting her voyeur's pleasures.

O Rose, I have never wanted anything more than to take you to a ball game. The chill of the rain soaked deeper into me.

I turned around, not knowing what to do, needing to look away from my past and find shelter. My Firebird was parked in front of the restaurant. I hadn't heard it pull up.

But then, it shouldn't have been there.

I should have taken the job in Oneonta. I should have stayed with the game and never have gotten involved with the highways and the rhythm of the tires, and with the Silver Lady. Rose leaned her elbows heavily on the counter, fist to cheek, staring through the windows at the highway, doubly cursed by the Silver Lady. She was trapped on it, too.

The engine turned over easily; it was still warm from recent driving. The heater was a blessing against the wet cold as I turned round and headed out onto the Turnpike. The ride to the next exit was long, but the storm had stuttered to a rest and the signs flowed brilliantly in the wet.

The exit rolled gently to the west toward a tollbooth. I paid the toll and turned around. I entered the highway heading north, back to New York.

The automatic gate was open. The storm had probably shorted out the mechanism; I would explain it to the toll-keeper when I got off. I'd be happy to pay the toll for the whole length of the road. As I rolled through onto the on-ramp, I heard a mechanical clatter from the gate, something like the laugh of the Silver Lady.

If I'd stayed off the Turnpike and driven home along back country roads, I might have made it. But on the highway I was in her hands. Maybe nothing would have helped me; probably nothing would have saved me.

Exits flashed past as I rolled along the highway once more, almost reassured by the steady rhythm of the car. Just before the exit for Outerbridge Crossing, I ran into the storm again. It was a reminder of the Silver Lady.

I turned off at the exit, headed for Perth Amboy and Staten Island. I followed the signs toward New Jersey 440 as along as I could see them in the rain, but the tollbooth never materialized. Soon I was reduced to following the yellow side marker painted along the edge of the roadway.

The next thing I knew, the Silver Cordoba was flashing through the rain toward me. I scuttled over to the left lane, knowing what

was going to happen. After toying with me, taunting me with freedom, she was going to kill me, almost within sight of home.

And it happened all over again. The attacking car, the lovers wrestling within, the bang and screech of steel on concrete, the burning rubber of the raped tire. Only this time I noticed my door handle shear off against the divider and clink down the highway.

That's when I started to cry. That clink was the laugh of the Silver Lady.

Something inside me let go: my rhythm.

I didn't bother to stop; I wrenched the Firebird away from the divider and took off after the Cordoba. Blood rage was in my veins.

Her taillights disappeared around a curve. I chased her, opening the Firebird up all the way. The tires slid on the wet pavement, the car slewed on the oily asphalt, but I hung onto the wheel and steered through it. Dimly behind the sheeting rain I saw a sign for the exit to Bordentown and Fort Dix.

I was back, somehow—back on the Jersey Turnpike.

I wasn't surprised. She would never let me leave. No matter what exits I took, I would be driving onto the Turnpike headed south. The only way I could ever be free was to kill her if I could.

I had to; I had to take Rose to the ball game.

Her taillights were reddening in the distance. The Firebird leapt forward again as I passed the exit; the Silver Lady's metallic laugh was in my ears as the wind howled through the trees.

There were no other cars on the highway, just me and the Silver Lady. I chased her for miles, following her alien driving rhythm, screaming my hatred and defiance at her the whole time. The darkness was static; day ceased to exist. There were only the Silver Lady and me, the highway, the trees, and the storm.

I topped a rise and there it was. The Cordoba was picking its way slowly through the storm in the right-hand lane, cruising for another victim. She'd assumed I was lost and wandering, I told myself.

I turned my headlights off and crept up on her. Even without lights I could see the mocking sticker pasted where a license plate belonged. I coughed my laughter into the night.

In an instant I pulled out beside her and turned on my high beams. Then I cut the wheel sharply to the right, smashing the Firebird against the front wheel of the Cordoba. It dipped and twisted toward me. Then it flipped. God, it flipped.

The trunk reared up slowly; the car rolled over onto the front left fender, which skidded backward. The whole car pinwheeled, landing on the corner of the rear bumper. That ignited the gas tank and the car wrenched away in agony, a rolling ball of fire.

I pulled off to the side of the road ahead and leaned against the wheel, shaking, drained of all strength. When I could, I backed up to the burning torch of a car. The rain has slowed to a steady drizzle.

I swear that I had the Cordoba in sight clearly the whole time. There had been no other car on the road. I *saw* the "I ♥ NY" not ten feet from me.

What was burning beside the road was a '62 Chevy, white, pitted with rust around the wheel wells. It wasn't the Cordoba. The car lay crumpled in the midst of the fire like a dead spider curled in on itself. Part of a corpse lay smeared on the asphalt in the pool of my headlights.

As the car burned, the metal gave off little screams of expansion. In the echo of the melted metal I could hear the laughter of the Silver Lady.

I drove away after her. Somewhere ahead of me she was waiting to kill. Trapped on the highway, I had no choice. I could only be free by killing her.

But in trying I had come to serve her after all.

When I killed that first car, my rhythm was no longer mine, it was hers. All that I had, my rhythm, and all that I might have had with Rose, she had taken. The Firebird no longer responded to my control.

The car drove a long time, heedless of my attempts to stop it, before I saw anything in the intensified rain. Then a state trooper roared past across the highway, dome lights flashing, siren howling agony through the night. Behind it in the distance I could see the revolving orange light of a wrecker.

The car drove me along the highway, rain pounding on the roof, rain bouncing off the hood, heater blasting through the vents. As the Firebird drove past the restaurant, I could see two figures inside: Rose behind the counter with her sore feet, her two kids, and her dead, searching eyes. Twice the highway had held out freedom to her, and twice it had pulled it from her closing grasp.

And the Silver Lady.

I had to stop, to reach out to Rose and take her from behind the counter into the bright sunlight and the cheering crowds, those

crowds and that light I had always been too busy to enjoy, caught up in my own rhythm. But the Firebird drove on, heedless of my desires.

It is always the middle of the night, the heart of a storm. Every time I see the Cordoba the wheels of the Firebird turn of their own accord into it; the engine accelerates in rage toward the flickering silver car, though I press against the useless brake with both feet, though I wrench at the immobile wheel.

It is never the Cordoba which burns at the side of the road.

I have become her lover after all; the Silver Lady has no need to drive the highway anymore. I cruise alone in the night, caught in her rhythm, and the sirens follow my route collecting the dead. I cruise alone searching for grace, seeking out death. They wait for me in that restaurant alongside the Turnpike.

The Death Runner

by THOMAS SULLIVAN

The jogger found himself
in the race of a lifetime against
his deadliest opponent: himself.

"Round and round you go, and where you stop . . ." Cy Harvey, country boy turned track star turned old man, repeated the phrase to himself as he ran. It was what he said to his wife when she nagged about running. How could a woman understand? How could a man, until his dreams were clouded and he turned inward? When you're over the hill, you run against yourself.

The five a.m. track at Barker High School was a phantom place in the spring. Half night, half day, its infield flashed with dewdrop emeralds, its cindered surface was richer than velvet, and over all there hung a mist that reached from the distant rim across the bowl to the elevated tennis courts.

From one end Harvey could just see the spars of the far upright framed against the nether blackness of woods and river, and beyond that the ghostly battlements of Durfey Hospital. When he covered the one hundred thirty-seven steps, give or take two, that kept him on the pace, he would be at the far curve, able to see the high school gym on the hill.

In his hand he held a stopwatch. He could not actually read it as he ran. Mist and movement conspired to blur the numbers. But he saw the position of the sweep hand in relation to the stem, and familiarity told him his splits. Even without it he knew. He knew within two seconds each quarter. The whole two miles must be evenly split—1:44 a quarter. No negative splits, no pace changes, he must run perfect quarters. He wished . . . he wished he could pace himself, that he could race a hologram of himself taken from

one of those perfect days. Such are the musings of a runner in transit.

When he was done he passed slowly up the hill, through a break in the trees, and into his own backyard. For a long while he sat on the terrace, and then, when he heard his wife stirring, he went in to take a shower.

"Honestly, you're going to get mugged out there," she chided.

"For what? My stopwatch?"

"They don't need a reason nowadays."

"Nonsense."

"I know it's important to you, but it's not worth your life. You're going to die running. Honestly."

He nodded happily. A good way to die. It takes a quiet spring morning with only a jay calling from the woods, and a perfectly black oval on a green apron, and a secluding mist that shapes fantasies, to kick your heart and stir your pulse. That is your setting, predictable and constant. And you are the variable for which it was made. You are the free will, the creator of change. Your footprints tear the early morning lace; your breathing is the metronome.

The next morning was the first day of fall. He wore his blue track suit and new pair of Nikes. The shoes left crisp prints on the first lap. He listened to their meter and his own biological rhythms filling the dell.

Pad, pad, pad . . .

He was the clock, sweeping harmoniously around the face of the visible world.

As he ran that morning he thought very hard about pace. He could almost divide it by steps, by units of energy. Residual quanta still remained from yesterday's analysis. They hung in the air like a miasma from the decomposed echo of that vanished runner—and of other days, too.

He thought more and more about this each time; and more and more his own presence seemed already there, lurking behind the goalpost, running just ahead, accumulating somehow into shadows and currents. On this particular morning he had trouble sorting the sound of his steps from their return off the far wall of the dell. They were out of sync. Source and echo seemed to have strayed—or multiplied. Every few measures the cadence was broken; pad-pad-tap-pad-pad-tap . . . He had the eerie feeling of being watched, as his gaze traveled up the hill to Durfey Hospital. Someone was throwing rocks on the track, he decided, and stared hard at the

mist to separate a flash of blue at the far turn.

Turns.

His next quarter was 1:42.

That was the beginning. A break in the pace.

He knew it the next morning, because the echoes and flashes were back, diametrically opposite. Louder and brighter. And on the final lap he saw and heard them move ahead. Two seconds. Exactly two seconds. A 1:42.

The 1:42.

For a long time he stood on the infield looking for it, waiting for it to pass. But it didn't, of course. The race was over. Eight laps. Two miles. If it was still there, it was waiting also. Opposite him.

He knew what he must do.

At dawn the next day he came down the rim, crossed the dewy grass at the same point, and ran in place several seconds. Then he started. Slowly. Slower than he had ever run before. Immediately he saw the crease of color pass behind the far goalposts.

Good. It was locked into the pace—yesterday's pace. It had to be yesterday's, because the slip of color wasn't blue this time, but white. He had worn white yesterday. At his near walk, he knew it would close quickly, and he was glad—until he heard the multiple thuds behind him and glanced back into the mist.

Now there were *two* flickers. One white, one blue.

Suddenly they were there, and he quickened his pace. Stride for stride. A thrill of power invested him. He had a peripheral awareness of white track pants unzipped at the cuffs and Nike Trainers kicking out next to his. And he knew it was himself. Atom for atom. Not the Cy Harvey in shirt and tie, not the meek husband of Edith Harvey, but the real one—the runner!

He knew it existed yesterday. It didn't even know he was here. But that didn't matter. Pace was communion.

A grueling, killing pace.

And at the end the self from two days ago—in a blue track suit—pulled out. That was the 1:42. Tomorrow there would be a fourth runner, he thought.

And there was.

And each day another, multiplying his joy. Edith clucked and pondered his sudden, secret strength, and finally went back to warning him: "Someday you'll find yourself facing a gang of those

crazy drug fanatics. Then you'll run. You'll run for your life!"

Run for his life. Of course he ran for his life. The literal meaning of that became clearer each day. There were almost thirty of them out there now. A great silent horde rumbling two miles at the inviolable pace, dredged up each dawn by the solitary being who existed "now." All alone one minute, he would start it with a quick kick, and suddenly they were breaking through whatever it was that defined time from energy. Crescendoing at his heels. The sound made him sweat, made him tremble. He no longer dared look around.

And then there was the lone runner way behind. The echo of the day he ran the slow lap to let them catch up. The pack continued to lap that one. It didn't bother him until the morning he finished and turned quickly. His bowels were awash to see so many images of himself lunging across the finish with silent, gaping mouths. But the real horror was that final runner—the one that was lapped. Because just before he staggered across the finish and faded, Cy Harvey saw that his face was covered with blood, his track suit torn and smeared.

He had been trampled.

Cy Harvey no longer came in the dawn with a clear heart. Because running had been his small acknowledgement. *Yes. I am physical. Evolution gave me a body I must use.* But now the surrogate manhood was becoming real. The danger was real. The chase called him at sunrise and he came. Because if there was danger there was victory. And he couldn't be a man without victory.

He began to understand something else, too. That yesterday's pace would never change, though today's would. And he promised himself—all his selves—he wouldn't quit. The day he couldn't keep up, couldn't stay the extra step ahead of yesterday's pace, he would accept the consequences. And each day until then would be a victory . . .

But one night a simple thing happened, something he had not thought about. It rained. There hadn't been a heavy soaking rain at night for a long time. It didn't occur to him that it would change anything. Everyone ran the same track. He came down the hill onto a surface that had drained but was soft and slow.

In the serene stillness he kicked it off—kicked the door open for the furious mob. For the next thirteen minutes and fifty-two seconds, they would thunder around on his heels. But it was yesterday's

track for them, and all the days' before. His track was today's.

He gulped lungfuls of air and returned cotton. There was no rhythm, no pace. Today was a sprint.

The tennis coach saw his body from the courts at eight; it was lying in the mud. "Looked like a tractor ran over him," he told the other teachers at lunch. But his wife knew that, of course, he had been beaten by unknown assailants.

She found instructions attached to his will in their safe deposit box and dutifully had the headstone inscribed: *Round and round you go, and where you stop...*

Worms from Mars

by AUGUSTINE FUNNELL

A ghoulishly gothic excursion into sex,
violence, racism—and a terror
as lurid as the title!

At first they were barely noticeable little things, perhaps four or five slender tubular segments forming a creature a centimeter or so in length, with vivid red markings in those spots where eyes would have been. Of course no one examined them closely enough to determine whether or not they had eyes, since after all they were only tiny worms on the sidewalk, here one, there another, and perhaps two blocks away a third, spaced widely enough that anyone seeing more than one probably wouldn't remember anyway. Who, other than hungry birds and children intent on squishing the moist little forms beneath sneaker soles, ever pays attention to worms? (And of course some *were* lost to birds and children subsequently delighted by the memorably bright splash of innards across the sun-soaked sidewalk. But that was before.)

If it had been anyone but Lenny Quarles who watched their emergence, someone might have taken appropriate measures. But in fact it was Lenny who saw them, and his, "I seen 'em. They's black wif red eyes an' they come from Mars," didn't convince anyone, not even the children. "They come in somethin' from the sky, little thing no bigger'n a goose egg, an' it jus' cracked open an' they crawled away. I bet they was a thousan' of 'em, easy."

No, no one believed Lenny the Loon.

Lenny had gotten his nickname from a *Wizard of Id* comic



strip. It was pure coincidence that his name was Lenny, of course, but the other, well, that was the unfortunate nature of circumstance, a little joke such as the universe wickedly delights in playing on the mentally unencumbered. In the strip, Sir Rodney had been questioning the Kingdom of Id's peasants, and one of them said he thought the King was good, kind, generous man. When asked his thoughts, the second peasant responded, "I'll go along with 'Lennie the Loon,' here." Even so it might have passed into obscurity but for the usual assortment of bullies and smart-asses, led by Eb McCracken—Crackers McCracken, he was called, not all that much brighter than Lenny—who picked up on it and tormented Lenny so much that eventually his lopsided grin came less often and his appearances on public streets decreased noticeably.

It didn't help him any that he was black, either, blacker than the proverbial Ace of Spades, blacker than coal in a box at midnight. Being black meant he underwent an additional if entirely different type of ridicule, but except for the actual physical manifestations of fear and prejudice (like the night Crackers McCracken had led an expedition of high school lads to Lenny's shack to see if black men really *were* better hung), Lenny barely seemed to notice. He took the dollar-an-hour jobs with pick and shovel, carted the loads and supplied muscle power whenever it was needed; and he provided the citizenry with someone to feel better than, someone to ridicule, someone to laugh at.

Lenny the Loon had seen worms from Mars.

O ver the course of the week he'd spent chopping wood for the Lafleurs he'd been very careful to arrive a few minutes before the specified starting time—eight o'clock—and to stay a few minutes after the agreed-upon quitting time of five. It was just something he'd learned to do with the Lafleurs whenever they hired him, ever since there had been that disagreement with Maurice over how many hours he'd spent painting the fence around their front yard. Maurice, it turned out, had written down the number of times Lenny had left early—three—and insisted on docking him a full hour for each part of an hour missed each day. Which meant that although the time missed might have totaled five minutes, he'd lost three hours' pay because of it; and because *he* hadn't written down any of his starting or quitting times, he'd had no ammunition with which to fight back, and he'd been forced to accept Maurice Lafleur's records without question. He couldn't read them anyway.

Maurice had saved himself three dollars that time.

This job was nearly completed; the wood had accumulated, cord after cord, stacked neatly along the back wall of the house, stakes driven into the ground at either end of each row to add stability. The piles wouldn't fall down, and unless someone were intent on knocking them over, couldn't easily be pushed down either. It had taken him five days of eight-to-five labor with a half-hour lunch, but he had enjoyed the job and taken pleasure in the tensing of his muscles just before swinging the axe, then more pleasure in the release of that tension when the blade sliced through maple and elm blocks. The hundreds of sweat beads that appeared on his face and joined at his chin to drip steadily to his chest seemed to him to indicate he was doing a good job, working hard, accomplishing something. And getting paid for it, too.

He'd positioned the final block and was wiping sweat from his brow when he saw the tiny black form wriggling through the wood chips, up this one and down that and under another, the distinctive red slashes where its eyes were making it immediately recognizable. Lenny knelt, but not before taking a rapid and surreptitious glance toward the corner of the house to make sure no one was coming. For a few seconds he watched the worm make its steady way through the chips toward the neatly stacked piles of wood, its line of movement as nearly straight as could be managed. As if it were heading directly for the house.

Something made Lenny turn to stare toward the woods; through them perhaps a mile, across a stream that was just wide enough you couldn't get over in a single jump, go another fifty yards or so, and that was where he'd seen the thing the size of a goose egg float leaflike to earth and disgorge its hundreds of wriggling occupants. That had been days ago. He supposed it might take a creature this tiny that long to get from there to here . . . though he'd seen plenty of them in town a day or so earlier.

Well, it made no difference to him where they went or how long it took them to get there; no one believed he'd seen what he claimed anyway, and what difference did it make if another variety of worm joined its cousins to become one more minor nuisance in the day-to-day life of the citizenry? He took a final look at the tiny creature still making its steady, determined way toward the woodpile and the house, and shrugged. It might be a little bigger than most of the others he'd seen, but that was about it. Little fatter, too, maybe.

Lenny finished chopping the wood. He stacked the final pieces as neatly as the others, swept the chips into a mound and shoveled them into boxes, then carried the boxes into the back shed and placed them near the kitchen door, again neatly, where the contents would be handy for kindling on winter mornings to come. Here on the northern outskirts of town the wind whistled louder and seemed colder when a couple feet of snow smothered the ground: getting a good fire going quickly was important. For an irritable type like Maurice Lafleur it was especially so; aggravated some February morning at the distance between the door and the boxes of wood chips, he would be sure to remember and deduct from Lenny's next pay a suitable amount for annoyance. Sometimes—and Lenny was sure this was one such time—Maurice could find nothing wrong and was forced to pay the exact amount agreed upon, with no later alterations.

Lenny took a last look around the backyard—there was another worm, he saw—then took the axe and shovel and broom into the shed and hung them neatly in those exact spots from which he'd gotten them earlier. He waited a few seconds for his eyes to adjust to the darkness, then knocked lightly once, twice, a third time, and waited patiently, head slightly bowed, hands clasped behind his back. Sweat still ran in rivulets down his face and neck to drench his already soaked shirt, but in the shadow it felt cool and good.

Eventually someone began fumbling with the door and it swung open to reveal a shirtless Maurice Lafleur in all his scrawny, hawk-nosed glory. He brushed a lock of limp sandy hair from his forehead and his eyes narrowed slightly, scrutinizing Lenny. "Finished?" He scratched absently at his untanned, almost hairless chest.

"Yes sir, all done jus' the way you wanted it."

Lafleur made an unconvinced sound, struggled into slippers, and joined Lenny in the shed. His eyes darted to axe, then to the boxes of woodchips, and he grunted something unintelligible before leading Lenny out and around to the back where he checked every row and gave each an experimental tap as though afraid the whole thing would collapse the moment Lenny disappeared with his money. He surveyed the backyard—if anything it was cleaner than when the job was started—and finally seemed satisfied.

It was as they were leaving that Lafleur noticed the worm, now crawling up the woodpile, and his ferret eyes went immediately to Lenny. Maurice Lafleur was not exactly a pillar of the community, or even one of its floorboards, but he *was* a part of it and he knew

as much as anyone else what went on. He nodded at the worm, and a glint came to his eyes. He smiled, but it was a tight and cruel thing. "That one of your worms, Lenny?"

Lenny licked his lips, glanced quickly at the black thing, and, the memory of laughter tinged with ridicule still fresh from some days earlier, nodded quickly.

Lafleur made an exaggerated show of searching the sky, glancing first this way, then that, hands shading his eyes for clearer vision. "Don't see no flyin' goose eggs, Lenny. Now how do you suppose this Martian worm got here?"

Lenny shifted his weight from one foot to the other, nibbled at his upper lip, and looked toward the other houses on this north-bound street, then away toward the woods. He wanted to leave but he hadn't been paid yet, and he knew instinctively, though he could not have put it into words, that if Maurice Lafleur thought humiliation would get him free labor there'd be precious little else to look forward to. He looked away from the woods and stared intently at the ground near his feet.

"Eh? You ain't got no ideas, Lenny?"

Lenny felt his cheeks get hotter, the perspiration begin anew on his chest and under his arms. "Guess it crawled here." He swatted the offending form to the ground and stepped forward quickly to press his boot against it, to mush it into the dirt and grind it to nothingness. When he lifted his boot, the thing was only half-squashed, the other half still struggling determinedly on.

"Them Martians worms is tough," Maurice Lafleur said, and laughed straight out, his eyes never leaving Lenny.

Lenny finished the worm for good, grinding the toe of his boot into the sawdusty earth for good measure. "They ain't that tough."

Lafleur laughed again, and the sound was an offensive rasp in the quiet August afternoon. It lingered in such a way that reminded Lenny of the worm's tenacious grip on life, but it was stronger, deeper, harder. It would survive a long time, that laughter; there was the power of ridicule fueled by fear and hate behind it, and long after the physical sound of it had faded, its essence would remain in the air, an invisible taint.

"I done the job, Mr. Lafleur, jus' like you wanted. Could you pay me now, please?"

The humor disappeared, but cruelty, the bitterness, did not. Lafleur looked Lenny up and down, sniffed a couple times, and frowned. "Always in a hurry for the money, ain't you, Lenny?"

What's the matter? You fuck up somethin' you don't want me to find out about?"

"No, sir, I ain't fuck . . . I mean, I ain't done nothin' wrong."

Lafleur nodded, still frowning. Then, "'Cept for the worm, eh, Lenny? Fucked him up real good, din'tcha?"

There was nothing else for it; Lenny grinned as if he too found it comical, and Lafleur was appeased, somewhat. He counted out the dollars as if they attached to his insides, the act of removing them a sort of torture. "Thirty-five, forty, forty-one." He reached into his pocket, pulled out two quarters, held them out. "There you go, Lenny. Nine hours a day for five days, less half an hour a day for lunch, is forty-one and a half hours, forty-one fifty."

For a second Lenny did not reach for the quarters. Simple addition was often too much for him; multiplication was a foreign, indescribable mystery, so he couldn't be sure the amount was correct; something in the back of his mind told him accepting the quarters was accepting the calculations, and although he hadn't figured it out beforehand, he was sure Lafleur was trying to cheat him.

"C'mon, Lenny, you want the fifty cents or don'tcha?" He started to put them back into the pocket, but Lenny reached out quickly, snatched both metal disks from Lafleur's hand and thrust into his shirt pocket, stuffing the bills in on top. When a tight little grin broke out along Lafleur's lips and his eyes glittered the way they had when he'd docked Lenny three hours wages for five minutes missed work, Lenny's heart sunk and he knew he'd been taken.

"You run along now," Lafleur told him, "and I'll get in touch with you when I want that back fence mended."

Lenny nodded miserably, looked once at the woodpile, and walked around the corner and out of Maurice Lafleur's vision. It wasn't enough to resolve the sting of Lafleur's having cheated him, or to erase the memory of the scrawny man laughing at him, but it made him feel a little better that if Lafleur was enjoying his gains it wasn't in his victim's presence. It was a small victory.

A movement in one window caught his eye and he turned to see one of Lafleur's three daughters staring out at him. Emily. She smiled and there was something in it that disturbed him; it wasn't the same as Lafleur's taunting grin, but it was fueled by drives no less intense and not much more complimentary. Emily. He nodded nervously as her gaze left his and went up and down his thickly muscled body. Emily. Who had lured him once into an old shed which had then adorned Lafleur's backyard, had spoken to him in a

way that made him uncomfortable and frightened, and who had been on the verge of other things when Lafleur himself arrived to give Lenny hell for screwing up some small part of whatever job he'd been hired for that time. Something had passed between father and daughter too quickly for Lenny to entirely catch, and Lafleur had slapped her, hard; she had gone down at his feet, sobbing and whimpering. Lenny had fidgeted, trying to ignore the entire thing, wanting to leave but not yet dismissed.

"Keep your eyes off the nigger," Lafleur had hissed at her, his tone thick with menace. Then he had mumbled something of which Lenny had caught only, "... no daughter of mine ..." and "... nigger's slut."

He hadn't been sure why Lafleur had been so angry, but he'd worked hard that afternoon to make everything okay. And whenever he saw Emily after that he had taken great pains not to say anything beyond "hello," nor do anything more than walk quickly away. As he did now, knowing without turning back to look that Maurice had come around the corner and was watching his hasty departure.

There were, as far as Eb McCracken was concerned, few things more satisfying than tormenting Lenny Quarles; pressed for some explanation of just why this might be so, Eb would not have been able to go very far beyond, "I dunno ... jus' like watchin' 'im get mad, I guess." Which in fact was the exact answer he'd once given a high school acquaintance not as entirely thrilled with the systematic harrassment of Lenny as most of his contemporaries. Eb wouldn't have made note of the fact that they were in many ways similar, both in their early twenties, both thoughtful and quiet when alone, both tall and handsome in a rustic fashion, and both possessed of an IQ only slightly above room temperature in a cold shed in December. There were other things too, deeper things like Lenny's abandonment as a child, raised by the county until it was decided he could function on his own as long as things were kept simple. This coincided with Eb's home life, which was as bleak as Lenny's even if the atmosphere did differ slightly. His father—who, Eb was to learn in a way that planted much bitterness in him, might have been one of a very high number of men—was completely unknown to him, just one of a long line of temporary boarders his mother had accomodated and watched leave when things got tedious or the wander-itch returned. His mother herself had been

sadly lacking in parenting skills, and she noticed him only long enough to give him hell for such things as not being there when she happened to want some chore performed, or when the grass around the hovel they called home needed another attack from the scythe. He had more or less grown up as abandoned and unpromising as Lenny, but where Lenny's personality had taken a soft, easygoing turn, Eb's had taken a hard, resentful one with a bitter, smoldering rage directed at everything that was better than what he had, and everyone who had it. Which was just about everything and everyone. But there was no way to lash out at them, to make them feel the depth and the passion of his sense of injustice and the intensity of his need for something better; no way at all. So he lashed out at someone who *could* be made to feel the enormity of that frustration and despair: Lenny Quarles. Nor did it lessen his hate for the ebony-hued simpleton that Eb's own father might, just might have been a particularly light-skinned nigger, but a nigger nonetheless. That possibility—given credence by Eb's swarthy complexion and slightly curly hair—Eb had heard many times, and every time he'd either come away bleeding or sent someone else away bleeding, but he'd never taken it without a fight. Never.

"I dunno . . . jus' like watchin' 'im get mad, I guess."

Lenny had two favorite places; one was the woods where he could listen to outraged blue jays and scolding squirrels, where the sound of wind through leaves was like the soft rustle of fine cloth drawn slowly through the hands, and the feel of leaves and moss and twigs beneath his feet was like a living mattress only temporarily disposed to permit his passage; the other was his home, little more than a shack which he'd insulated and furnished with some help from the county, and which he proudly kept tidy and clean. He liked both places for much the same reasons: no one was there to make fun of him, and if he chose to work it was for himself, to improve the view or the surroundings. He felt free in these two places, able to forget that his thoughts were slower than most, simpler than most, and, as he'd been told many times, not as important as most. In these places his thoughts were his own, and that made them acceptable. More, it made them good; alone, with no standards against which to judge and compare, it made them the best. After a full day's labor, at whatever labor, he enjoyed the walk home, the drawing near and anticipation of a quiet time surrounded by the components of his world, the sense of being

home and secure.

Today he knew, as far as fifty yards away, that not everything was exactly right; there was something just a little out of kilter, not enough that it stuck out and yelled at him for attention, but enough that it grated on his sense of order. Closer, he saw what it was: the front gate, that same gate he'd put together and added to the fence he'd also painstakingly built, had somehow managed to come loose from its catch, and one hinge was broken. He frowned, puzzled that the hinge could break on a day when there was no wind to swing it wildly about. At the gate he stopped long enough to examine the damage, but it took only a quick assessment to determine he'd need a new hinge. He frowned again, then sighed and entered the yard, wishing as he always did that the nameless mongrel who'd taken up with him a year earlier hadn't bitten one of Eb McCracken's cronies and been shot by the county. He missed the dog's antics at his arrival, missed scratching its thick, floppy ears, missed its warm, liquid tongue lapping his hand in trusting, uncritical affection.

He was on the second of three steps that ascended to the porch, still thinking about the hinge and missing the dog, when he went down heavily, the board refusing to bear his weight. It didn't crack or splinter, it simply fell to the ground beneath his steps, and his left leg followed it, wedged painfully in the open space, his eyes and mouth wide with a mixture of surprise and pain. He caught his breath, then began the painful process of extraction, catching his knee on a hidden nail head, scratching into the already scraped skin. Free, he stood beside the steps, puzzled. The board had just fallen in, without . . .

He saw then that the nails at both ends had been removed, and the board shifted so that just enough wood to keep it on its mount had been left to keep it appearing secured to the whole. A bird wouldn't have landed on it without causing its collapse. He gritted his teeth against the pain as blood began to soak through his pants leg, and looked around. Like Maurice Lafleur, he lived near the woods on the outskirts of town, close enough to walk in for groceries, far enough away that it seemed more country than community. But he could see no one watching or standing nearby taking amusement from his misfortune. He'd fix the step later; for now he was hungry and tired, and wanted only to get inside, away from the world. He stepped over the gaping crack and limped across the porch to the door, but when he gripped the knob and turned and

pulled, it came free in his hand. For several seconds he stood, staring stupidly at the door knob clenched tightly in his thick hand, then he settled it carefully in front of the door and looked around again, but still he could find no one watching. He could feel someone, though, could feel intent, narrow eyes following his every movement, could sense the enjoyment derived from his difficulties.

With an effort he tore his searching gaze from the yards further down the street and the woods beyond, and returned to the problem at hand. It seemed obvious the only way in now was through a window. He moved to the nearest one, but it was nailed shut. All of them, he discovered, all the way around the house, were nailed shut. And somewhere, not far away, someone watched; he knew it from experience, knew that tomorrow, or next week or next month even, someone would ask him something about windows and door-knobs, and it would almost certainly be when a grinning crowd had gathered to laugh and poke fun. He forced down the anger and embarrassment that even now were struggling to break free, and pointedly kept his attention from the woods and surrounding areas, narrowing it instead to a thin beam focused on the problem at hand. And after a time, standing alone and thoughtful in the late afternoon sunlight, he remembered the jackknife in his pocket, and he withdrew it and set about the laborious process of prying loose the deeply hammered nails, trying very hard not to notice the damage he was doing to the woodwork as he scraped and dug.

Suddenly the woods seemed appealing to him, seemed to call him away from his troubles, and he realized with a wistfulness he didn't understand that things had changed, somehow; home was no longer the sanctuary it had almost always been. If it had been in his nature or within his ability to think it through, he'd have seen how it began, how things like the occasional rock hurled against the door and the bag of garbage dumped on the blanket of sun-dazzled snow covering his yard the previous January had led inexorably to this moment, as surely as had the fierce humiliation raging through him the night Eb McCracken and his cohorts had barged in and stripped him and laughed at him in a way that cut and scarred him without his ever knowing exactly why. He'd have seen how this moment was inevitable; and how also it was only the first of many moments exactly identical; it would have been obvious to him that those moments would pile one upon another like crushing weights upon his back until their combined pressure grew too great and he would not be able to free himself of them. He would find no more

contentment in his home, no sanctuary.

But he was Lenny the Loon, and he thought of none of those things.

It took an hour of persistent scratching and wrenching of the nails—and when he was through the frame was ruined—but he managed to dig the nails out of one of the front windows to permit him access to his home. When he saw on the floor the pile of ripped picture books he had carried with him since childhood in the orphanage, he wept and he hated. But being Lenny the Loon he could not vent his rage or plan retribution; he could only sit on the floor beside the brightly colored pieces of ragged and ripped paper and cry while from the security of a small alcove near the door a tiny statue of Jesus watched dispassionately. And when that was done he set about cleaning up his home, finally alert for additional ignominies inflicted upon it in his absence; but as if the realization that there could be more damage done were the force required to halt the destructive process, he found nothing else amiss. When he finally got around to repairing the doorknob, he found Eb McCracken and a couple of his friends outside his gate, astride motorcycles, watching the house and grinning. "Don't build things the way they used to, do they, Lenny?" McCracken called out. Then they left, the echo of their departure fading long before the cloud of dust caused by spinning wheels finally settled.

He would no more have been able to ignore the gently insistent pull of the cool, quiet woods than he could have stopped the steady flow of blood through the veins and arteries; had it been a weekday and his services hired for some job or other he would have spent the entire working day in a miserable state of mind, thinking not of his task but of the green and light and shadows. However, this was Saturday, and although he did sometimes work on Saturday, this one had been left open; immediately upon awakening he had made a couple sandwiches, grabbed a handful of cookies and a few carrot sticks, and carefully filled a quart vacuum flask with cherry Kool-Aid and some ice cubes. He had packed it all carefully in his knapsack, and left the violated sanctuary of his home for the unspoiled refuge of the woods.

The entire morning had been spent traipsing first along this path, then down that one, pausing here for a brief listen to distant sounds, continuing along other byways long familiar but never bereft of interest and wonderment. Until at last he came to the end

of what he perceived as *his* side of the stream which took two jumps to cross; on the other side and through another mile of woods was Maurice Lafleur's home. Sometimes he went across and explored on that side, but more often than not he stayed here, preferring the larger portion of the woods to the seemingly amputated section that backed Lafleur's property.

The thought of Lafleur was the day's first negative facet, and immediately upon its heels he remembered the ovoid thing the size of a goose egg, and he knew it wasn't far from where he stood. He shrugged it off, almost with the same feeling of embarrassment he'd felt while grinding the worm beneath his boot in Lafleur's yard. But there was no one with him to reinforce that shame, and after a moment curiosity changed his mind and he was taking long, determined strides toward the clearing.

It took a few minutes to find the exact place, but when he did he quickly discovered the shell out of which the black worms had crawled had disintegrated almost completely. Only fragments of it remained. He reached tentatively for them, then, ashamed of his caution, clutched as many as he could and brought them close to his face for examination. They felt like brittle old paper, and the mere act of lifting them caused them to crumble further. He closed his hand, squeezed, and when he opened his fingers he held only a fine powder the gentle forest breeze was gradually scattering throughout the clearing. He watched the dust swirl away, caught in an updraft that lifted it higher, higher . . .

For several long seconds it seemed to Lenny that time had stopped and there was nothing but the slightly off-center view above him: sunlight filtering through swaying leaves; the leaves themselves, oak, maple; sturdy branches reaching out from thick trunks; the thirty, forty, or more goose-egg-sized ovoids that clung to those branches, swaying back and forth like bulbs on the stalk of a Chinese lantern . . .

For a long time he watched the ovoids, and the forest became still around him. It had seemed still all day—much more than he was used to—but he hadn't thought about it much, and when he had he'd put it down to the catch-all: "just one of those things." The silence now was an unfriendly thing, and he found he was straining to hear familiar sounds; far away there were some, but nothing close by.

He wanted to go tell someone about the peculiar things in the clearing, but the desire was quickly washed away by memory.

Okay, so they weren't from Mars, he told himself as he watched the pale ovoids drift slowly back and forth, but they *were* strange, weren't they? And they *were* filled with tiny black worms with red slashes across their eyes. The effort of thought fueled by curiosity — were they something new, or something to do with the government tests he'd heard mentioned on the radio? — became too much for him, so he discarded his questions.

He saw suddenly that one of the containers had become dislodged and was floating to earth; it was halfway down before he noticed it, and when he did he was struck by its graceful, placid descent. Then it was on the forest bed not fifteen feet from him, and it rested there for only a few seconds before there was a soft, almost inaudible crack, and it split along invisible seams to disgorge hundreds of very tiny black forms decorated with minute red slashes. In seconds they had begun an exodus from the shell, an irregularly expanding circle with a wriggling black diameter.

A sudden and near choking disgust boiled up in Lenny's throat; they were far tinier than the ones he'd seen in town and on Maurice Lafleur's property, but there was something infinitely more menacing about them, about their constant progress away from the abandoned shell. The nausea passed, and he watched the raggedly circular diameter continue to expand. When the edge nearest him had reached his boots he found it impossible to hold back the urge to stomp them, and he killed several, causing his injured knee to ache, before he realized he would not be able to get them all.

He moved back a few steps. Although he had heard nothing, something made him look to the treetops; drifting serenely groundward was another ovoid. And inside . . . Not knowing why, he turned and ran blindly from the clearing, thick legs pumping him quickly over the carpet of leaves and undergrowth. He was half a mile away before he stopped, gasping and sweating. He rested against a familiar rock, removing his knapsack and setting it on the leaves. He rubbed at his knee, now throbbing with pain. Gradually his heart stopped racing and the fear left him, but he cast several nervous glances in the direction of the clearing before he permitted himself to sit and reach into the knapsack for a sandwich.

Munching through the meal, he was at a loss to explain the sudden fear and revulsion that had bubbled to the surface; certainly, he reminded himself, there was very little to be afraid of from worms not even as long as his fingernails. He'd been afraid the first time, but that was different; then he'd thought the little thing was

some sort of spaceship—he looked around nervously, embarrassed with just the memory—and he'd been afraid of the unknown. Today, though . . .

Then he saw the squirrel, its tiny grey-furred body still and dead. He'd seen dead animals hundreds of times out here—it was a fact of life, something he understood—but today, with unreasoning fear still aswirl within him, it was an unsettling sight. There was something else, though, some minor incongruity similar to the off-kilter tilt of his gate the day before; it didn't scream for attention, but it couldn't be ignored . . . it was something in the way the body lay, contorted, unnatural. Interested now, he forgot his earlier fear and stuffed the remainder of his sandwich into the knapsack, then went to examine the corpse. It hadn't been dead that long, though there were a few flies buzzing about and a faint decaying smell was noticeable. He nudged the beast with his foot, then saw dried blood on the squirrel's grey fur, a black trickle of it starting at the ear. He'd seen plenty of animals shot before, but when they were this small the bullets generally made a bigger mess of their heads. He nudged it again, turned it over, and found a blood trail almost identical to that on the other side. The blood was black and shiny, and it held his eyes as though with an invisible thread.

"Hello Lenny."

Lenny spun, slipped and went down heavily, smashing his injured knee. He scrambled to his feet quickly, and then, heart pounding, he saw her standing beside his knapsack, leaning against the rock and smiling the familiar smile he had come to fear for some reason he couldn't quite get a handle on.

"Hello, Emily."

"I didn't think I was ever going to find you, out here." She wore a light blue blouse, semitransparent, and tight shorts that made her legs look like plump white sausages. Lenny looked around nervously, almost expecting Maurice Lafleur to appear through the underbrush.

Emily laughed, a lightly musical trilling Lenny discovered wasn't mocking him. "You're afraid of my father, aren't you?"

Lenny licked his lips uncomfortably and nodded, but there was more fear in him than that for Maurice Lafleur. He kicked at the squirrel, striking it with more force than he had intended so that it came to rest almost exactly between them. Emily looked upon the rodent with distaste, then brought her gaze up quickly to meet Lenny's.

"He's dead," Lenny said unnecessarily. "Foun' 'im in the grass."

Emily nodded, then moved away from the rock and around the squirrel. "You don't have to worry about my father," she said softly. "He was still sleeping off last night's drunk when I left. He won't have any idea where I've gone."

She stopped in front of him, placed her hands on his chest. A soft breeze blew stray wisps of dark hair off her shoulders and into Lenny's face. It smelled like lilacs. Her gaze caught his and that vague, hard something he always associated with Emily Lafleur blazed there in nearly uncontrollable frenzy. Even in the shadow from branches above them her eyes glinted, and her breathing deepened as if she struggled beneath some overpowering weight. Lenny could not avert his gaze. In the pit of his stomach something tightened, and although his heart pounded and his knees threatened to give out, he could not move, or in any other way deal with the fear that throbbed through him no less powerfully than that other thing Emily Lafleur had forced to the surface in him. When her eyes narrowed to a squint and her face started moving toward his, when a sunbeam blazed across her moist lips and she began to slowly move the palms of her hands up and down his chest, Lenny was mesmerized. He made no effort to resist as their lips met and she slowly, methodically, unbuttoned his shirt and slipped her arms around his torso to clutch at his back. Her tongue was in his mouth then, and her breathing came even more heavily as she guided him with gentle pressure toward the ground. Experienced hands worked first at his clothing, then hers, then placed his hands in forbidden places; and though he wanted to resist, tried to resist, he was powerless to do anything that might stem the lust she had caused to surface in him.

She placed him gently on his back and smiled at his nervousness, but the effect was chilling; in the scattered sunlight she was a female version of her father, hard cold glints of a frightening desire motivating her actions so powerfully that they were drained of any emotion, any meaning. She kissed him again, running her hands up and down the muscled tautness of his naked body, and the fires blazed more fiercely in him. Her eyes closed, she squatted over him, and with practiced ease inserted him into her.

The breeze still blew stray locks of Emily's dark hair across her shoulders; even with her thrusting atop him and moaning softly, even with his own need becoming stronger and more immediate Lenny was enthralled by that hair, by the fragrance of spring lilac

that drifted to his nostrils. He wanted to close his eyes and lose himself in the tension that built still in his stomach and loins, but he could not; the dark strands of lilac held him.

The worm appeared from nowhere; one second there was hair blowing softly back and forth across her bare shoulders, the next a tiny black form—bigger than the ones he'd seen today, but smaller than the ones in town—was crawling across her right shoulder toward her neck. He opened his mouth to warn her and got out the first syllable of her name, but her fingertips brushed across his lips and she shushed him and whispered for him to be quiet. She left her fingertips there, her own mouth open in a soft, red O, passion manifesting itself in whispered moans.

A cold memory of that day in Lafleur's barn came to Lenny, and he let it stay in his mind, let himself recall the stark, blatant lust Emily had shown in her eyes before her father arrived, which Lenny had not then understood, but which had left him feeling foolish and the object of ridicule. He clung to that memory as the black form ascended her neck and fought off the wind-caressed hair, and he made no further attempt to warn her of its presence. The lust had not lessened in his body, but his mind had managed to disengage itself enough to watch the scene with dispassionate interest; he moved beneath her and heard her moans, coming louder and deeper and quicker; but his eyes remained open, watching the segmented form wriggle its patient way up her neck to her ear, then around to the front and inside. That part of his brain which had managed to disentangle itself from the force of lust within him found it amusing that she did not know what had happened. It had been a long time since Lenny had been able to laugh at anyone else.

The urgency of release took his entire attention then, and the tension in him tightened further, became a thing of granite and flame, an unrelenting tide he could struggle against but not overcome. Atop him, Emily shrieked her passion, adding its impetus to his own.

He climaxed suddenly, explosively, to the accompaniment of Emily's screams, screams that no longer contained the barest trace of passion, but which instead were drenched in pain and fear and outlined by a trickle of blood that had found its way out of her ear and down along the curve of her neck. She fell back off him, rolling on the ground and clawing at her right ear, shrieking in mindless paroxysms of agony. Within seconds her fingernails had shredded her ear and the right side of her face, but still she

scratched and writhed and shrieked.

In less than a minute she had stopped crying and screaming and the final twitch of her body had passed. She lay there, obscenely contorted, both hands dug into the side of her face near the right ear, her head barely a foot from the squirrel. Lenny watched in silent horror as a thick, glistening head poked out of the squirrel's blood-blackened ear and then squeezed the rest of its moist, black body out. It wriggled over the grey fur and dropped to the leaves, then quickly squirmed toward Emily's blood-spattered face. It was plump, thick, the red slashes across its face glowing almost orange. Quicker than its cousin it found its way up Emily's face to the ear, and in seconds began squeezing into the darkness, Lenny's final sight of it one quick glimpse of its back section wriggling spasmodically, as if the entranceway was just a tad too tight. Then, with one final frantic jerk it disappeared, and only a rapidly diminishing stream of blood testified to its presence.

He had no memory of gathering his clothes and fumbling them onto his body, nor did he remember picking up the knapsack and racing through the woods. He did, though, remember the squirrel with holes through either ear, and the slimy black body that had departed for a more sumptuous feast elsewhere. Almost as a secondary facet of the experience he could remember the sensation of his climax, but even that was fading slowly into the background as something only generally pleasureable, with the details blurred by the overlapping memory of Emily screeching and straining to rip from her head the invader that had come there to feed.

When he reached the edge of the forest he stopped only long enough to button his shirt and tuck its tail into his pants. His heart continued to pound, but it was more from what he'd seen than from the exertion of running. He knew someone should be told, something should be done, but there was no one to believe him and no one to act.

It was only a short walk to his house, but he saw another worm, this one as plump and moist as the one that had wriggled out of the squirrel and into Emily. He stepped on it, hard, and barely slowed it down. Desperate, he found a rock and battered it repeatedly until he was finally able to crack its damp but frighteningly strong exoskeleton and splatter its unprotected insides across the dusty roadway.

From there he went straight home, worried and frightened, wondering how long it would be before someone else learned what

he knew. Should he take someone to see Emily? No, he would get in trouble for that; it was that very thing which he and Emily had done that had so enraged Marucie Lafleur, he was certain of it. If the hawk-nosed man could get so furious about Emily's thinking about it, what would be his response to the completed act? Lenny did not choose to think it through.

Home, he bounded past the as-yet-unrepaired step, and hurried into the tainted sanctuary from which he had removed all trace of yesterday's invasion. And found, this time, every piece of furniture he owned smashed and chopped to kindling; a stuffed chair in which he'd sat to go through the destroyed picture books had been slashed, and the stuffing pulled out and strewn across the floor; his metal restaurant-style table had been bent so thoroughly out of shape that it could never again be used; his clanking refrigerator had had its door removed, and the food was now dirty and rotting on the floorboards; the glass window in his oven door was shattered, the elements up top missing; his bed was kindling, the mattress just a pile of unenclosed stuffing and springs; the tiny statue of Jesus, his Savior and Protector, had been removed from its alcove and split in half. There was nothing left standing, nothing left in one piece which could be separated into two. Even his utensils had been bent and twisted. He staggered through the chaos as if he'd been struck with a hammer, but no matter how hard he wished it away, nothing changed.

When he heard the unmistakable sound of a motorcycle engine roaring to life and the subsequent deafening thunder of overrevving, he didn't bother to go to the door to watch. Nor, this time, did he sit among the clutter and weep for those things taken from him. This time he did not hate blindly or begin the tedium of cleaning up.

This time he wanted revenge.

In bed, Eb McCracken sighed; he was tired and more than a little light-headed from the beer he'd sloshed into himself over a Cashman's Hotel. For not the first time he cursed the body and soul of Emily Lafleur, vowing to himself that she'd have some explaining to do tomorrow. All night he'd waited for her, and her having promised faithfully last night she'd show up. Truth to tell he'd as much enjoyed putting the hustle on the new waitress—some Madonna character from back east—as he would have enjoyed Emily's company, but right now in the dark he didn't have either one of them,

and it was Emily who had promised to be with him. Besides, it made him look bad in front of his friends when she didn't show. He suspected sometimes that she did it on purpose, that broken dates were her way of leading him on and laughing at him. She didn't laugh in the sack, though, that was for sure. He alternated taking comfort from the memories and fury from the loneliness until he began to doze, carnal thoughts of first the tried-and-true Emily, then the unknown quantity, Madonna, flitting through his mind.

He thought the soft creak of floorboards signalled a footstep, but he was too groggy to make the connection between footstep and intruder; by the time he had, it was too late. He felt the massive hand clench his shoulder, and even though he couldn't see it to be sure, he knew all too well that the cold hard metal pressing against his throat was a knife blade. In the faint moonlight that streamed through his solitary window he could see, out of the corner of his eye, who held him, and a keen edge of fear sliced through him. But he couldn't bolt from the bed without running the risk of having his throat slit, so he sat where he was, trying very hard not to shake.

Confidently, the restraining hand left his shoulder, but the knife edge pressed just a little harder, a subtle warning from the simpleton who, while he might not have consciously known he was putting himself at a slight disadvantage by releasing his grip, had subconsciously been all too aware of it, and compensated accordingly. But that thought was just a little too abstract for Eb McCracken, and it didn't occur to him. For one brief instant he wondered if he should start an apology for the destruction, then immediately dismissed the thought.

The hand was suddenly in front of his face, something dark and thick and moist held between clawed fingers. Moonlight made its wriggling form glisten, and thin luminous red lines glowed softly.

"Know what this is?" Lenny asked in a whisper, and it was different from anything he'd ever said before. "It's a worm," he went on, "a worm from Mars."

McCracken had no idea what was happening, but the hand that an instant before had been in front of his face moved like lightning to clap against the side of his head, and for a very brief second Eb felt something slimy crawl over his ear. Then the hand was removed, also the knife, and Lenny Quarels moved back, grinning, his ivory teeth just barely visible in the moonlight.

"Yes sir, a worm from Mars."

But Eb McCracken didn't hear; and, Lenny noted with some satisfaction, he made much less noise than Emily Lafleur, but he put up a lot more fight, thrashing about in the bed, tangling his feet in the blankets while he clawed at his head, then ripping the blankets to ribbons as the pain increased and his lunatic jerk continued, finally abating with one last thrust that nearly lifted his entire body off the bed.

And that, Lenny the Loon reflected as he mentally reviewed the long and complete list he'd made in his head, was one.

FOOD, GAS, LODGING

by CRAIG W. ANDERSON

Three little words—surely that was too short for a death sentence.

The raccoon scurried up the embankment and stopped at the edge of the asphalt, its forepaws drawn up against the dark chest, its eyes glittering like chipped glass in the reflected light from the sign glowing in the fog. The raccoon edged out onto the road surface, head twitching north and south, rear legs pattering nervously. Somewhere within the animal's brain an instinct, a sense beyond even its meager understanding, flickered like a candle. A warning.

During the southward turning of its head, the raccoon's unbelievable hearing first detected the thudding roar bearing down on it from the north; during the furred swing back to the north, the eyes of the raccoon saw, in incredible detail, the jagged parallel lines slicing the surface of a black tire, white printing reading "Road Hugger" flickering around and around, and a small stream of pebbles and water droplets slanting out from beneath the dark rubber. The raccoon heard, only briefly, growing louder, the rising shriek of locked brakes causing rubber to twist and burn. Then the raccoon was flattened and twisted and ground under the monster and thrown off the roadway to lie split and steaming in the fog and cold.

"Jesus Holy Keerist!" said the man in the car to his rearview mirror. His pale hands twitched and dropped from the steering wheel. He listened to the engine ticking and cracking in the silence; he smelled the thick odor of burned rubber. He couldn't see ten feet in the thick fog. Philip Kriner could have been encased within a gigantic ball of lint except for the buzzing, flickering highway sign that sent its glow through the fog.

"Goddamn squirrels!" Kriner was sweating; the window on the

driver's side was rolled all the way down and mist drifted against his hot cheek. His pin-striped three-piece suit was drenched with sweat. He felt like hell.

Nerves, he thought, looking around at the piece of road his car squatted on. He pushed the door open and got out, lighting a cigarette with trembling hands. The left front fender of the Mercedes was smeared with dark blood. The chill air rubbed against Kriner, and he sat in the open door, lank hair sticking to his forehead, his tailored trousers wrinkled, his wingtips scuffed. The getaway had been close.

He gave the back seat a glance, more to assure himself that his company's assets were still there than for any rational reason. These assets were locked in a beige briefcase: half a million in hundred-dollar bills. That was it; not much to show for eight months of hard work. Kriner was outraged at the unfairness of it all. He'd had a great scam going, and then one fine day, yesterday in fact, the Feds had burst into his plush front office and blown the whole operation sky high. Kriner's boiler room silver stock scam was shot down, and he'd almost been shot down with it. Just a few precious minutes to scoop out the safe, then into the Mercedes and he was gone. It was all *almost* legitimate, but when the Feds got it up their asses like that, well, it wouldn't do him much good to stick around to debate the issue.

And now, here, out in the boonies somewhere, he'd just wiped out a squirrel or something, nearly killed himself, gotten blood all over the grey fender of his Mercedes, practically crapped in his pants, and he thought that it wasn't fair. He was scared shitless of going back into the slammer, as this time, if he were caught, it would be hard time; he'd have some enemies inside due to the bust of his "business," and they wouldn't be overly gentle in their enforcement of the laws of their particular jungle.

He watched the blood drip off the fender, and when his cigarette scorched his mouth, Kriner sighed the sigh of the weary and misunderstood, swung his impeccably tailored legs into the car, and hauled ass out of there, smoke and rocks and burning rubber smells filling the chilled, foggy air.

This fog was unbelievable. He'd never seen anything like it, and he'd been raised in the San Joaquin Valley where the tule fogs would drift in, blanketing everything in cotton-thick invisibility. This fog was different. Kriner's foot eased off the gas bit by bit until he was creeping along, only the center line of the narrow country road



informing his exhausted mind that he was still moving, still on the macadam. Like a gigantic snail, the Mercedes rolled gently along until he could barely see the glow of a sign through the fog, the light fighting to get to him.

"I don't believe it," Kriner smirked. "Somebody's actually got a business out here?" Being something of a businessman himself, he could appreciate the audacity of the owner. Why, there wasn't a god-damn thing within twenty miles. Or so he thought; he'd been down this way once or twice, but he hadn't paid much attention to the scenery, as each trip had been a pleasure jaunt: once with the bountiful Arrington twins, lovely girls, the other while he was riding the crest of a coke high. But he remembered enough to know that, except for an isolated farmhouse here and there, this country was bare of life. Fields, fields, and more fields; miles of crops and little else. He certainly didn't remember anything with a sign glowing over a gravel driveway, a sign that crackled and sizzled and said: "FOOD-GAS-LODGING" in grey neon.

"Real catchy sign they've got there," he muttered to himself, rolling the Mercedes between the rusted gas pumps and the entrance to: "JAKE'S EATS—WHERE THE CONSUMER'S ALWAYS RIGHT." Flaking paint inched its way downward along the boarded front of the small building. The windows were fogged over, venetian blinds halfway drawn, some of the slats hanging down. He could see the dim forms of people evidently eating whatever passed for food at JAKE'S EATS, there behind the glass.

Kriner got out and looked around; nothing but fog and cold, and the twin glass-topped gas pumps gurgling beside him, their hoses looking like pythons.

Crunching through the gravel, Kriner went to the trunk of the Mercedes and placed his briefcase therein; he thought for a moment and finally removed his .38 and strapped it on before slamming the trunk lid closed. No use taking chances in case some country bumpkin decided to look into the trunk; he'd protect his assets at any cost. Well, not any cost. Kriner was, if nothing else, a realist; what good were your assets if you were not there to enjoy them, to make them grow until they could supply the good life to which all entrepreneurs aspired? He noticed that the water from the trunk had flown up like a sprinkler, and his Foster Grants were speckled and blurred. Taking it in stride, Kriner ripped the glasses from his pinched face and smashed them to the ground, driving one of his heels into them for good measure. They were just for show anyway, he thought, his

teeth grinding together with rage. He moved toward the patched, rusted-out screen door that hid the opening to JAKE'S EATS.

After pulling open the squealing screen door, Kriner pushed through into the inside of JAKE'S. He reeled momentarily.

Kriner's vision blurred, his suit felt like a suit of armor, his feet slipped over the floor as if it were coated with saliva. It was hot inside JAKE'S EATS. Kriner grabbed at the back of a booth with his left hand and steadied himself, breathing hard. He glanced around as he recovered. Must be the difference in temperature, he thought.

THE lunch counter ran from his right to his left, the surface punctuated with napkin containers, salt and pepper shakers, catsup bottles, and assorted silverware. Black stool seats glared at Naugahyde stare at him from their lineup next to the counter, some of them populated by persons in various states of slumped disarray. The booths on the left, next to the greasy-looking windows, were filled, four to a booth, with grey-looking people who stared at Kriner as if he were a rat or stray cockroach who had happened by. The welcome mat appeared to be out at JAKE'S EATS.

His self-confidence returned via the holstered .38 under his sweating right armpit; Kriner squared his pin-striped shoulders and walked carefully to the counter, sitting gingerly on a stool. Through the order window into the kitchen, stainless steel shapes could be seen through the smoky mist of cooking. A bald head, probably the cook's, bobbed past the opening, and a pale hand snatched a tag off the order spindle. He stared at the countertop; it seemed to shimmer under the glow of the fluorescent tubes that were arranged haphazardly on the low ceiling.

"Well, well. What's it gonna be, bud? Coffee? You need a menu?" Kriner looked up to find a grinning, puffy-faced gentleman confronting him across the counter, a rag gripped in a beefy hand swirling over the ersatz marble.

"Yeah, mac. Coffee. The menu . . ." Kriner felt a menu insinuate itself into his right hand; he flicked it open as the guy behind the counter, who wore a black bow tie, smiled at him out of the side of his mouth.

The coffee materialized near his left hand, most of it in the saucer. It was hot, and Kriner sipped at it, aware of something else besides the bitterness rolling thickly over his tongue. He swiveled slightly on the stool and looked at the densely populated booths. It seemed to be darker there, along the line of windows, the diners

silhouetted against the white swirl of fog outside. They were a quiet bunch, muttering among themselves, moving slowly, almost swaying in their dark area. Occasionally a flicker of white eyeball would glitter in Kriner's direction, and then its owner would hunch back over his or her meal.

"Hey bud, you wanta order? We got a special tonight, ribs and soup." The counterman smiled a wet smile.

"Sure, mac. Ribs and soup it is," Kriner said.

"Hey, Joe, a rib and soup for the gentleman!" the counterman shouted to the baldy in the kitchen. A muffled curse issued through the opening. Kriner lifted an eyebrow.

"Ah . . . Joe's a little cranky. Been here a long time, can't go nowhere else, if you know what I mean," the counterman said, pouring himself a cup of coffee and leaning over on his elbows to peer speculatively at Kriner.

"My name's Jake. Named the place after myself. I don't think that's too arrogant, do you, bud?"

"No," said Kriner, feeling decidedly uncomfortable as the slack face of Jake loomed closer, the wet gurgle of his breathing becoming noticeable.

"Yeah. Nice little place. Not much business, but every so often, things perk up." Jake smiled. "Know what I mean?"

"Sure. Like tonight, Jake. Busy around here." Kriner motioned to the quietly munching, slurping crowd at the counter and windows.

"Tonight? Oh yeah, yeah, a good night. Busy enough, I guess. When you arrived, it got better." Jake grinned again.

Kriner suddenly felt bad. The diners in the booths and those on the stools along the counter all looked at him. It was very quiet. Kriner felt himself sweating again. It was hot inside JAKE'S EATS.

"Yeah? I don't know what the hell you mean by that, friend. Forget that crap I ordered. Here's for the coffee." Kriner stood and tossed a dollar onto the counter, where it seemed to stick, flatten out, and suck down onto the counter.

"Hey bud, no need to get excited. I just meant that around here, we don't get too many strangers. And when we do, it's a special occasion, you know?" Counterman Jake spread his pale meaty arms in a shrug.

Suddenly a thought pierced Kriner's brain; he looked from the booths toward the windows, outside into the fog, outside where the parking lot was empty, except for his Mercedes. He turned and

took a step toward the door, one hand reaching for his gun, the other for the doorknob.

"How'd all these kindly folks get here without cars? Is that what you're thinking, Kriner? Is that it?" Jake said quietly, a chuckle in his moist voice. The fog swirled outside the windows.

"How do you know my name?" Kriner shouted, finding that it was difficult to move, there in the heat inside JAKE'S EATS, with old Jake himself chuckling behind the counter.

"Oh, we *always* know the names, Kriner. You're like all of them." He motioned with a pale, fat, wavering arm toward the crying, moaning figures in the window booths. "They know your name. Always have; we've been waiting for you."

An orange glow erupted in the parking lot. Kriner struggled to extract his gun from the slippery holster; he ran sweat into his natty three-piece suit as he watched shadowy figures with glowing tools gently, delicately slice his Mercedes into small pieces, which were then carried off, still glowing with heat. It took only moments, and they worked like fingers on the same hand, economical and efficient, those shapes with their white, shiny eyes and grey faces.

"Jesus Holy Keerist! What are you doing? My *car* for God's sake! What . . ." Kriner sobbed, fumbling at his gun, his formerly impeccable wingtip shoes seeming to sink into a slimy, pale, sucking floor.

"Hey, what did I ever do to you, mac? What're you going to do—hey! Let me out of here!" Kriner struggled and then watched with wide, staring eyes as Jake flowed out from behind the counter, his shirt blending perfectly with his moist, wormlike lower body that sucked across the pale, undulating floor.

Jake smiled a loose smile, his features melting and coming and going with excitement, anticipation. "It's not what you've done to *us*, Kriner, but what you've done to so many others . . . We wait for the likes of you, Kriner. You'll fit right in with the rest of the diners here." He laid a flowing spaghetti-fingered hand on Kriner's arms and the fingers burrowed through the pinstripes and needled into Kriner's flesh.

"Or . . . or maybe you can be the cook!" Jake shrieked uproariously, and all the others joined in, their slack, toothless mouths opened like suckers on some giant tentacle, a single wet, gurgling, giant laugh that drowned out Kriner's scream. Or maybe it was the slithering slippery strands of a thousand wormlike threads that filled his mouth that stopped his scream. He was pulled into the wet, coldly

pulsing embrace of Jake, and his scream stuttered to a whimpering halt. His last rational thought before he slipped into an eternity of madness was that old Jake, good old Jake, certainly seemed to enjoy his work.

Outside the fog swirled and the condensed water ran in rivulets down the windows of the diner, obscuring the ecstatic welcome Philip Kriner was receiving inside JAKE'S EATS.

The neon sign out there near the road flickered, sizzled, flashed on and off once or twice, the FOOD-GAS-LODGING pulsing through the fog like a white, blinking eye.

Then, with a final wink and flicker, it went out.

The Ash-Tree

by M. R. JAMES

The classic tale of a country house, a family circus – and a legacy of undying horror.

Everyone who has traveled over Eastern England knows the smaller country houses with which it is studded – the rather dank little buildings, usually in the Italian style, surrounded with parks of some eighty to a hundred acres. For me they have always had a very strong attraction, with the grey paling of split oak, the noble trees, the meres with their reed beds, and the line of distant woods. Then, I like the pillared portico – perhaps stuck on to a red-brick Queen Anne house which has been faced with stucco to bring it into line with the “Grecian” taste of the end of the eighteenth century; the hall inside, going up to the roof, which hall ought always to be provided with a gallery and a small organ. I like the library, too, where you may find anything from a Psalter of the thirteenth century to a Shakespeare quarto. I like the pictures, of course; and perhaps most of all I like fancying what life in such a house was when it was first built, and in the piping times of landlords’ prosperity, and not least now, when, if money is not so plentiful, taste is more varied and life quite as interesting. I wish to have one of these houses and enough money to keep it together and entertain my friends in it modestly.

But this is a digression. I have to tell you of a curious series of events which happened in such a house as I have tried to describe. It is Castringham Hall in Suffolk. I think a good deal has been done to the building since the period of my story, but the essential features I have sketched are still there – Italian portico, square block of white house, older inside than out, park with fringe of woods, and

mere. The one feature that marked out the house from a score of others is gone. As you looked at it from the park, you saw on the right a great old ash-tree growing within half a dozen yards of the wall, and almost or quite touching the building with its branches. I suppose it had stood there ever since Castringham ceased to be a fortified place, and since the moat was filled in and the Elizabethan dwelling-house built. At any rate, it had well-nigh attained its full dimensions in the year 1690.

In that year the district in which the Hall is situated was the scene of a number of witch trials. It will be long, I think, before we arrive at a just estimate of the amount of solid reason—if there was any—which lay at the root of the universal fear of witches in old times. Whether the persons accused of this offense really did imagine that they were possessed of unusual power of any kind; or whether they had the will at least, if not the power, of doing mischief to their neighbors; or whether all the confessions, of which there are so many, were extorted by the mere cruelty of the witch finders—these are questions which are not, I fancy, yet solved. And the present narrative gives me pause. I cannot altogether sweep it away as mere invention. The reader must judge for himself.

Castringham contributed a victim to the *auto-da-fé*. Mrs. Mothersole was her name, and she differed from the ordinary run of village witches only in being rather better off and in a more influential position. Efforts were made to save her by several reputable farmers of the parish. They did their best to testify to her character, and showed considerable anxiety as to the verdict of the jury.

But what seems to have been fatal to the woman was the evidence of the then proprietor of Castringham Hall—Sir Matthew Fell. He deposed to having watched her on three different occasions from his window, at the full of the moon, gathering sprigs "from the ash-tree near my house." She had climbed into the branches, clad only in her shift, and was cutting off small twigs with a peculiarly curved knife, and as she did so she seemed to be talking to herself. On each occasion Sir Matthew had done his best to capture the woman, but she had always taken alarm at some accidental noise he had made, and all he could see when he got down to the garden was a hare running across the path in the direction of the village.

On the third night he had been at the pains to follow at his best speed, and had gone straight to Mrs. Mothersole's house; but

he had had to wait a quarter of an hour battering at her door, and then she had come out very cross, and apparently very sleepy, as if just out of bed; and he had no good explanation to offer of his visit.

Mainly on this evidence, though there was much more of a less striking and unusual kind from other parishioners, Mrs. Mothersole was found guilty and condemned to die. She was hanged a week after the trial, with five or six more unhappy creatures, at Bury St. Edmunds.

Sir Matthew Fell, then Deputy Sheriff, was present at the execution. It was a damp, drizzly March morning when the cart made its way up the rough grass hill outside Northgate, where the gallows stood. The other victims were apathetic or broken down with misery; but Mrs. Mothersole was, as in life so in death, of a very different temper. Her "poysonous Rage," as a reporter of the time put it, "did so work upon the Bystanders—yea, even upon the Hangman—that it was constantly affirmed of all that saw her that she presented the living Aspect of a mad Divell. Yet she offer'd no Resistance to the Officers of the Law; onely she looked upon those that laid Hands upon her with so direfull and venomous an Aspect that—as one of them afterwards assured me—the meer Thought of it preyed inwardly upon his Mind for six Months after."

However, all that she is reported to have said were the seemingly meaningless words: "There will be guests at the Hall." Which she repeated more than once in an undertone.

Sir Matthew Fell was not unimpressed by the bearing of the woman. He had some talk upon the matter with the Vicar of his parish, with whom he traveled home after the assize business was over. His evidence at the trial had not been very willingly given; he was not specially infected with the witch-finding mania, but he declared, then and afterward, that he could not give any other account of the matter than that he had given, and that he could not possibly have been mistaken as to what he saw. The whole transaction had been repugnant to him, for he was a man who liked to be on pleasant terms with those about him; but he saw a duty to be done in this business, and he had done it. That seems to have been the gist of his sentiments, and the Vicar applauded it, as any reasonable man must have done.

A few weeks after, when the moon of May was at the full, Vicar and Squire met again in the park, and walked to the Hall together. Lady Fell was with her mother, who was dangerously ill,

and Sir Matthew was alone at home; so the Vicar, Mr. Crome, was easily persuaded to take a late supper at the Hall.

Sir Matthew was not very good company this evening. The talk ran chiefly on family and parish matters, and, as luck would have it, Sir Matthew made a memorandum in writing of certain wishes or intentions of his regarding his estates, which afterward proved exceedingly useful.

When Mr. Crome thought of starting for home, about half past nine o'clock, Sir Matthew and he took a preliminary turn on the graveled walk at the back of the house. The only incident that struck Mr. Crome was this: they were in sight of the ash-tree which I described as growing near the windows of the building, when Sir Matthew stopped and said:

"What is that that runs up and down the stem of the ash? It is never a squirrel? They will all be in their nests by now."

The Vicar looked and saw the moving creature, but he could make nothing of its color in the moonlight. The sharp outline, however, seen for an instant, was imprinted on his brain, and he could have sworn, he said, though it sounded foolish, that, squirrel or not, it had more than four legs.

Still, not much was to be made of the momentary vision, and the two men parted. They may have met since then, but it was not for a score of years.

Next day Sir Matthew Fell was not downstairs at six in the morning, as was his custom, nor at seven, nor yet at eight. Hereupon the servants went and knocked at his chamber door. I need not prolong the description of their anxious listenings and renewed batterings on the panels. The door was opened at last from the outside, and they found their master dead and black. So much you have guessed. That there were any marks of violence did not at the moment appear; but the window was open.

One of the men went to fetch the parson, and then by his directions rode on to give notice to the coroner. Mr. Crome himself went as quick as he might to the Hall, and was shown to the room where the dead man lay. He has left some notes among his papers which show how genuine a respect and sorrow was felt for Sir Matthew, and there is also this passage, which I transcribe for the sake of the light it throws upon the course of events, and also upon the common beliefs of the time:

"There was not any the least Trace of an Entrance having been forc'd to the Chamber: but the Casement stood open, as my poor

Friend would always have it in this Season. He had his Evening Drink of small Ale in a silver vessel of about a pint measure, and tonight had not drunk it out. This Drink was examined by the Physician from Bury, a Mr Hodgkins, who could not, however, as he afterwards declar'd upon his Oath, before the Coroner's quest, discover that any matter of a venomous kind was present in it. For, as was natural, in the great Swelling and Blackness of the Corpse, there was talk made among the Neighbours of Poyson. The Body was very much Disorder'd as it laid in the Bed, being twisted after so extream a sort as gave too probable Conjecture that my worthy Friend and Patron had expir'd in great Pain and Agony. And what is as yet unexplain'd, and to myself the Argument of some Horrid and Artfull Designe in the Perpetrators of this Barbarous Murther, was this, that the Women which were entrusted with the laying-out of the Corpse and washing it, being both sad Pearsons and very well Respected in their Mournfull Profession, came to me in a great Pain and Distress both of Mind and Body, saying, what was indeed confirmed upon the first View, that they had no sooner touch'd the Breast of the Corpse with their naked Hands than they were sensible of a more than ordinary violent Smart and Acheing in their Palms, which, with their whole Forearms, in no long time swell'd so immoderately, the Pain still continuing, that, as afterwards proved, during many weeks they were forc'd to lay by the exercise of their Calling; and yet no mark seen on the Skin.

"Upon hearing this, I sent for the Physician, who was still in the House, and we made as carefull a Proof as we were able by the Help of a small Magnifying Lens of Crystal of the condition of the Skinn on this Part of the Body: but could not detect with the Instrument we had any Matter of Importance beyond a couple of small Punctures or Pricks, which we then concluded were the Spotts by which the Poyson might be introduced, remembering that Ring of *Pope Borgia*, with other known Specimens of the Horrid Art of the Italian Poysoners of the last age.

"So much is to be said of the Symptoms seen on the Corpse. As to what I am to add, it is meerly my own Experiment, and to be left to Posterity to judge whether there be anything of Value therein. There was on the Table by the Beddside a Bible of the small size, in which my Friend—punctuall as in Matters of less Moment, so in this more weighty one—used nightly, and upon his First Rising, to read a sett Portion. And I taking it up—not without a Tear duly paid to him wich from the Study of this poorer Adumbration

was now pass'd to the contemplation of its great Originall—it came into my Thoughts, as at such moments of Helplessness we are prone to catch at any the least Glimmer that makes promise of Light, to make trial of that old and by many accounted Superstitious Practice of drawing the *Sortes*; of which a Principall Instance, in the case of his late Sacred Majesty the Blessed Martyr King *Charles* and my Lord *Falkland*, was now much talked of. I must needs admit that by my Trial not much Assistance was afforded me: yet, as the Cause and Origin of these Dreadfull Events may hereafter be search'd out, I set down the Results, in the case it may be found that they pointed the true Quarter of the Mischief to a quicker Intelligence than my own.

"I made, then, three trials, opening the Book and placing my Finger upon certain Words: which gave in the first these words, from Luke xiii. 7, *Cut it down*; in the second, Isaiah xiii. 20, *It shall never be inhabited*; and upon the third Experiment, Job xxxix. 30, *Her young ones also suck up blood*."

This is all that need be quoted from Mr. Crome's papers. Sir Matthew Fell was duly coffined and laid into the earth, and his funeral sermon, preached by Mr. Crome on the following Sunday, has been printed under the title of "The Unsearchable Way; or, England's Danger and the Malicious Dealings of Antichrist," it being the Vicar's view, as well as that most commonly held in the neighborhood, that the Squire was the victim of a recrudescence of the Popish Plot.

His son, Sir Matthew the second, succeeded to the title and estates. And so ends the first act of the Castringham tragedy. It is to be mentioned, though the fact is not surprising, that the new Baronet did not occupy the room in which his father had died. Nor, indeed, was it slept in by anyone but an occasional visitor during the whole of his occupation. He died in 1735, and I do not find that anything particular marked his reign, save a curiously constant mortality among his cattle and livestock in general, which showed a tendency to increase slightly as time went on.

Those who are interested in the details will find a statistical account in a letter to the *Gentlemen's Magazine* of 1772, which draws the facts from the Baronet's own papers. He put an end to it at last by a very simple expedient, that of shutting up all his beasts in sheds at night, and keeping no sheep in his park. For he had noticed that nothing was ever attacked that spent the night indoors. After that the disorder confined itself to wild birds, and beasts of chase.



But as we have no good account of the symptoms, and as all-night watching was quite unproductive of any clue, I do not dwell on what the Suffolk farmers called the "Castringham sickness."

The second Sir Matthew died in 1735, as I said, and was duly succeeded by his son, Sir Richard. It was in his time that the great family pew was built out on the north side of the parish church. So large were the Squire's ideas that several of the graves on that unhallowed side of the building had to be disturbed to satisfy his requirements. Among them was that of Mrs. Mothersole, the position of which was accurately known, thanks to a note on a plan of the church and yard, both made by Mr. Crome.

A certain amount of interest was excited in the village when it was known that the famous witch, who was still remembered by a few, was to be exhumed. And the feeling of surprise, and indeed disquiet, was very strong when it was found that, though her coffin was fairly sound and unbroken, there was no trace whatever inside it of body, bones, or dust. Indeed, it is a curious phenomenon, for at the time of her burying no such things were dreamt of as resurrection men, and it is difficult to conceive any rational motive for stealing a body otherwise than for the uses of the dissecting room.

The incident revived for a time all the stories of witch trials and of the exploits of the witches, dormant for forty years, and Sir Richard's orders that the coffin should be burned were thought by a good many to be rather foolhardy, though they were duly carried out.

Sir Richard was a pestilent innovator, it is certain. Before his time the Hall had been a fine block of the mellowest red brick; but Sir Richard had traveled in Italy and become infected with the Italian taste, and, having more money than his predecessors, he determined to leave an Italian palace where he had found an English house. So stucco and ashlar masked the brick; some indifferent Roman marbles were planted about in the entrance-hall and gardens; a reproduction of the Sibyl's temple at Tivoli was erected on the opposite bank of the mere; and Castringham took an entirely new, and, I must say, a less engaging, aspect. But it was much admired, and served as a model to a good many of the neighboring gentry in after years.

One morning (it was in 1754) Sir Richard woke after a night of discomfort. It had been windy, and his chimney had smoked persistently, and yet it was so cold that he must keep up a fire.

Also something had so rattled about the window that no man could get a moment's peace. Further, there was the prospect of several guests of position arriving in the course of the day, who would expect sport of some kind, and the inroads of the distemper (which continued among his game) had been lately so serious that he was afraid for his reputation as a game preserver. But what really touched him most nearly was the other matter of his sleepless night. He could certainly not sleep in that room again.

That was the chief subject of his meditations at breakfast, and after it he began a systematic examination of the rooms to see which would suit his notions best. It was long before he found one. This had a window with an eastern aspect and that with a northern; this door the servants would be always passing, and he did not like the bedstead in that. No, he must have a room with a western lookout, so that the sun could not wake him early, and it must be out of the way of the business of the house. The housekeeper was at the end of her resources.

"Well, Sir Richard," she said, "you know that there is but the one room like that in the house."

"Which may that be?" said Sir Richard.

"And that is Sir Matthew's—the West Chamber."

"Well, put me in there, for there I'll lie tonight," said her master. "Which way is it? Here, to be sure," and he hurried off.

"Oh, Sir Richard, but no one has slept there these forty years. The air has hardly been changed since Sir Matthew died there."

Thus she spoke, and rustled after him.

"Come, open the door, Mrs. Chiddock. I'll see the chamber, at least."

So it was opened, and, indeed, the smell was very close and earthy. Sir Richard crossed to the window, and, impatiently, as was his wont, threw the shutters back, and flung open the casement. For this end of the house was one which the alterations had barely touched, grown up as it was with the great ash-tree, and being otherwise concealed from view.

"Air it, Mrs. Chiddock, all today, and move my bed furniture in in the afternoon. Put the Bishop of Kilmore in my old room."

"Pray, Sir Richard," said a new voice, breaking in on this speech, "might I have the favor of a moment's interview?"

Sir Richard turned round and saw a man in black in the doorway, who bowed.

"I must ask your indulgence for this intrusion, Sir Richard. You

will, perhaps, hardly remember me. My name is William Crome, and my grandfather was Vicar in your grandfather's time."

"Well, sir," said Sir Richard, "the name of Crome is always a passport to Castringham. I am glad to renew a friendship of two generations' standing. In what can I serve you? For your hour of calling—and, if I do not mistake you, your bearing—shows you to be in some haste."

"That is no more than the truth, sir. I am riding from Norwich to Bury St. Edmunds with what haste I can make, and I have called in on my way to leave with you some papers which we have but just come upon in looking over what my grandfather left at his death. It is thought you may find some matters of family interest in them."

"You are mighty obliging, Mr. Crome, and, if you will be so good as to follow me to the parlor and drink a glass of wine, we will take a first look at these same papers together. And you, Mrs. Chiddock, as I said, be about airing this chamber . . . Yes, it is here my grandfather died . . . Yes, the tree, perhaps, does make the place a little dampish . . . No; I do not wish to listen to any more. Make no difficulties, I beg. You have your orders—go. Will you follow me, sir?"

They went to the study. The packet which young Mr. Crome had brought—he was then just become a Fellow of Clare Hall in Cambridge, I may say, and subsequently brought out a respectable edition of Polyænus—contained among other things the notes which the old Vicar had made upon the occasion of Sir Matthew Fell's death. And for the first time Sir Richard was confronted with the enigmatical *Sortes Biblicæ* which you have heard. They amused him a good deal.

"Well," he said, "my grandfather's Bible gave one prudent piece of advice—"Cut it down." If that stands for the ash-tree, he may rest assured I shall not neglect it. Such a nest of catarrhs and agues was never seen."

The parlor contained the family books, which, pending the arrival of a collection which Sir Richard had made in Italy, and the building of a proper room to receive them, were not many in number.

Sir Richard looked up from the paper to the bookcase.

"I wonder," says he, "whether the old prophet is there yet? I fancy I see him."

Crossing the room, he took out a dumpy Bible, which, sure

enough, bore on the fly leaf the inscription: "To Matthew Fell, from his Loving Godmother, Anne Aldous, 2 September 1659."

"It would be no bad plan to test him again, Mr. Crome. I will wager we get a couple of names in the Chronicles. H'm! What have we here? 'Thou shalt seek me in the morning, and I shall not be.' Well, well! Your grandfather would have made a fine omen of that, hey? No more prophets for me! They are all in a tale. And now, Mr. Crome, I am infinitely obliged to you for your packet. You will, I fear, be impatient to get on. Pray allow me—another glass."

So with offers of hospitality, which were genuinely meant (for Sir Richard thought well of the young man's address and manner), they parted.

In the afternoon came the guests—the Bishop of Kilmore, Lady Mary Hervey, Sir William Kentfield, et cetera. Dinner at five, wine, cards, supper, and dispersal to bed.

Next morning Sir Richard is disinclined to take his gun with the rest. He talks with the Bishop of Kilmore. This prelate, unlike a good many of the Irish Bishops of his day, had visited his see, and, indeed, resided there for some considerable time. This morning, as the two were walking along the terrace and talking over the alterations and improvements in the house, the Bishop said, pointing to the window of the West Room:

"You could never get one of my Irish flock to occupy that room, Sir Richard."

"Why is that, my lord? It is, in fact, my own."

"Well, our Irish peasantry will always have it that it brings the worst of luck to sleep near an ash-tree, and you have a fine growth of ash not two yards from your chamber window. Perhaps," the Bishop went on, with a smile, "it has given you a touch of its quality already, for you do not seem, if I may say it, so much the fresher for your night's rest as your friends would like to see you."

"That, or something else, it is true, cost me my sleep from twelve to four, my lord. But the tree is to come down tomorrow, so I shall not hear much more from it."

"I applaud your determination. It can hardly be wholesome to have the air you breathe strained, as it were, through all that leafage."

"Your lordship is right there, I think. But I had not my window open last night. It was rather the noise that went on—no doubt from the twigs sweeping the glass—that kept me open-eyed."

"I think that can hardly be, Sir Richard. Here—you see it from

this point. None of these nearest branches even can touch your casement unless there were a gale, and there was none of that last night. They miss the panes by a foot."

"No, sir, true. What, then, will it be, I wonder, that scratched and rustled so—aye, and covered the dust on my sill with lines and marks?"

At last they agreed that the rats must have come up through the ivy. That was the Bishop's idea, and Sir Richard jumped at it.

So the day passed quietly, and night came, and the party dispersed to their rooms, and wished Sir Richard a better night.

And now we are in his bedroom, with the light out and the Squire in bed. The room is over the kitchen, and the night outside still and warm, so the window stands open.

There is very little light about the bedstead, but there is a strange movement there; it seems as if Sir Richard were moving his head rapidly to and fro with only the slightest possible sound. And now you would guess, so deceptive is the half-darkness, that he had several heads, round and brownish, which move back and forward, even as low as his chest. It is a horrible illusion. Is it nothing more? There! Something drops off the bed with a soft plump, like a kitten, and is out of the window in a flash; another—four—and after that there is quiet again.

Thou shalt seek me in the morning, and I shall not be.

As with Sir Matthew, so with Sir Richard—dead and black in his bed!

A pale and silent party of guests and servants gathered under the window when the news was known. Italian poisoners, Popish emissaries, infected air—all these and more guesses were hazarded, and the Bishop of Kilmore looked at the tree, in the fork of whose lower boughs a white tom cat was crouching, looking down the hollow which years had gnawed in the trunk. It was watching something inside the tree with great interest.

Suddenly it got up and craned over the hole. Then a bit of the edge on which it stood gave way, and it went slithering in. Everyone looked up at the noise of the fall.

It is known to most of us that a cat can cry; but few of us have heard, I hope, such a yell as came out of the trunk of the great ash. Two or three screams there were—the witnesses are not sure which—and then a slight and muffled noise of some commotion

or struggling was all that came. But Lady Mary Hervey fainted outright, and the housekeeper stopped her ears and fled till she fell on the terrace.

The Bishop of Kilmore and Sir William Kentfield stayed. Yet even they were daunted, though it was only at the cry of a cat; and Sir William swallowed once or twice before he could say:

"There is something more than we know of in that tree, my lord. I am for an instant search."

And this was agreed upon. A ladder was brought, and one of the gardeners went up, and, looking down the hollow, could detect nothing but a few dim indications of something moving. They got a lantern, and let it down by a rope.

"We must get at the bottom of this. My life upon it, my lord, but the secret of these terrible deaths is there."

Up went the gardener again with the lantern, and let it down the hole cautiously. They saw the yellow light upon his face as he bent over, and saw his face struck with an incredulous terror and loathing before he cried out in a dreadful voice and fell back from the ladder—where, happily, he was caught by two of the men—letting the lantern fall inside the tree.

He was in a dead faint, and it was some time before any word could be got from him.

By then they had something else to look at. The lantern must have broken at the bottom, and the light in it caught upon dry leaves and rubbish that lay there for in a few minutes a dense smoke began to come up, and then flame; and, to be short, the tree was in a blaze.

The bystanders made a ring at some yards' distance, and Sir William and the Bishop sent men to get what weapons and tools they could; for, clearly, whatever might be using the tree as its lair would be forced out by the fire.

So it was. First, at the fork, they saw a round body covered with fire—the size of a man's head—appear very suddenly, then seem to collapse and fall back. This, five or six times; then a similar ball leapt into the air and fell on the grass, where after a moment it lay still. The Bishop went as near as he dared to it, and saw—what but the remains of an enormous spider, veinous and seared! And, as the fire burned lower down, more terrible bodies like this began to break out from the trunk, and it was seen that these were covered with greyish hair.

All that day the ash burned, and until it fell to pieces the men

stood about it, and from time to time killed the brutes as they darted out. At last there was a long interval when none appeared, and they cautiously closed in and examined the roots of the tree.

"They found," says the Bishop of Kilmore, "below it a rounded hollow place in the earth, wherein were two or three bodies of these creatures that had plainly been smothered by the smoke; and, what is to me more curious, at the side of this den, against the wall, was crouching the anatomy or skeleton of a human being, with the skin dried upon the bones, having some remains of black hair, which was pronounced by those that examined it to be undoubtedly the body of a woman, and clearly dead for a period of fifty years."

Zombies

by DOLLY OGAWA

It was a real Rocky Horror Show —
directed by his own mother!

I really dug being a Zombie, they're a group that's going places, they've got a bad sound. I dug the chicks too, the Zombies were getting it on with the chicks. It was bad.

Ma was so hyper about my amplifiers; the only kind of music she liked was quiet. I tried to be cool with her, after all, she is my mother, but we're not tuned in to the same scene. I ask you, how could she expect me to keep up my chops, when she wouldn't even let me turn up the amps? The old biddy got a headache every time I took out my axe.

She'd been a bitch about everything, she never smoked or drank anything stronger than tea; I watched her go completely bonkers over finding a little shit in my room. One time it was only a few seeds.

The last time she found my little stash of grass, coke, and a couple of Ludes, she tried to call the law. I took the phone away from her and ripped it out of the wall. She was screaming so much I had to smack her a couple of times to get her to shut up. I could see there was no point in hanging around and trying to explain her freakout to the neighbors, so I got my gear together and split.

I hung out with a guy in my group, the Zombies, and we were staying loaded and playing until his old lady split and he forgot to pay the electric bill. When I plugged in and couldn't get any amps, I decided to cut out.

It was close to my birthday, so I decided to butter the old bag up. If I couldn't move back in right away, I might be able to get some bread out of her to keep me going till the next gig, which didn't start for another two weeks. I could use some bucks. If I mention it

in time, I might keep her from getting me a sweater or cologne or some other mother-type garbage.

I dialed the number, the phone rang a couple of times, and then this deep-voiced old geezer answered.

"Hello, is Mrs. Jackson there?" I said, wondering who this was.

"No, she's not in at the moment, may I take a message?"

"Yeah man, tell her Sonny called and I'll call her back." I couldn't think of anything else I wanted to say to this voice. I wanted to ask who he was but probably I should let her answer that question.

Then I thought of something that made me laugh, maybe she got a live-in boyfriend when her Sonny split. That was too far out. First of all, who would want her aging carcass, and also she knew that I wouldn't dig it.

I went on to the rehearsal for the new gig. We've got a good group, they're really bad. Our whole trip is occult and weird, some mean music. The Blue Zombies are bad, really bad, and the chicks dig us. Man, all the Zombies have no trouble getting chicks.

We worked on the lights and the fluorescent makeup until it was ready. We put our speakers on all four sides and turned up the amps. We've got a wild sound. Danny, our lead guitar, writes most of what we do. We're getting a name around town. We've even been talking with some record company about a deal but it sounds too good, I hate to talk about it.

We wear these long black jackets and makeup, it looks weird; something between Kiss and The Grateful Dead. We're into our own scene, though a lot of our stuff might be considered punk. We dig violence. I personally love it when it's bad and things start to happen. Making blood flow always made me feel great. I really dug being a Zombie.

By the end of the rehearsal I'm itching to call Ma back, I don't dig sleeping in my car with my axe and my clothes. I see this chick that's been hanging around a lot eyeing me, so I lay it on her. I need a place to crash for a couple of days and she looks like she's gonna go for it.

She says, "Sure, you can hang out at my pad. I just want you to know that I'm into leather."

That's cool with me. Hey, I don't put down anyone else's scene, man. It turns out she likes a little light strapping, and I dig giving strokes, I'm just not into receiving.

For a couple of days everything is cool, I'm even tripping on it. When I remember, I try to call home at different hours of the day

and night but I can't seem to connect with Ma. Either the guy answers or nobody does.

Finally, on the third day Bitsy, that's the chick's name that I've been staying with, Bitsy tells me her old lady is coming back. Well, that scene's too kinky even for me, so I say later, and split.

Now then, I'm back on the street. Actually, I've got a little bread but I've been thinking of investing in a lid. I'd hate to have to spend the little money I've got on a pad. Besides, if I have to rent something it would be a dump and I like to live better, at least close to the beach.

So, I try calling her again, boy was I glad to hear her voice.

"Hey Mom, it's Sonny, your bad little kid. Where have you been?"

"Did you want something, Sonny?" Cold man, just like that, really cold.

"Hey Ma, I just want to know how are you, and how's everything, you know."

"Well, I'm fine, I'm very busy, but I'm glad you called, I wanted to tell you that I've rented your room, Sonny."

"Hey lady, that wasn't nice. That must be the old coot I talked to on the phone. I'll come over and give him notice to vacate. I need a place to stay, Ma. I'm on the street, sleeping in my car."

"No, son, sorry, but I've definitely decided not to live with you anymore. You'll just have to make other arrangements. I have to go now, I have something on the stove. Bye, dear."

The phone was dead in my hand. Boy, she was getting crazy in her old age, as if you can just push your own son, your own flesh and blood, out, just like that. She owes me, I haven't had it easy, hell, I'm only twenty-seven. Well, it's not going to be just like that. I'm going over there and get this settled. First I'll get rid of that creep that's living there, I'll kick ass if I have to. Then I'll handle her.

She'll do things my way if I can talk to her in person. How would she like me to cut my wrists all over her carpet? Maybe I'll cut hers. My mind is working clickety-clack, clickety-clack. I can hardly wait to face these two. She sounded so brave on the phone, I'm betting she'll be a pushover in the flesh.

All the way over in the car I'm thinking about the nerve of her deciding she doesn't want to live with me. I didn't ask to be born. I don't dig it. Who asked her anyway? For chrissakes, she's my mother, who told her she has a choice? What the fuck are mothers

for anyway? Shit, I'll fix her.

I'm hyper-mad when I pull up in front of the house. It's okay, in a dumb neighborhood, but the yard is kind of cool. Ma does the work herself, it's good for her to keep busy. I don't think musicians should take chances with their hands by doing chores, yardwork, and repairs. I take good care of my hands, man.

The lights were on inside, she had the drapes open a little and I could see her sitting there watching tv. I couldn't see anybody else there, which was good. If I could talk to her alone first, soften her up and then show some balls with the tenant, I probably could get things moving without too much hassle.

I knocked on the door, politely, even though I felt like kicking it in. She made me wait for a minute, she turned down the tv and waddled around to answer the knock, finally.

"Sonny, I told you on the phone . . ." She started to go on but I interrupted.

"Hey Ma, come on, don't I get to visit? I can at least visit, I can talk to you. Man, we don't have to live together to be friends." I could see her hesitate, but I was cool, I didn't even push against the door.

"I guess it would be all right, but just for a minute. I like to turn in early."

She let me in and I checked around, but no sign of the intruder.

"Where is everyone?"

"Oh, you mean the tenant. He's usually around. Maybe he's upstairs in his room."

Man, that pushed a button, his room, how could she? The hell it is, I thought, that room even has my initials carved in the windowsill.

"Hey Ma, you're really hurting me. You don't seem to understand that I don't dig a stranger calling that his room. I'm going up there and when I'm finished setting him straight you and I are gonna settle this, once and for all. This is Sonny's home, as much as it is yours and you'd better not forget it."

She didn't say anything, but this time she didn't shrivel up, looking scared to say anything, either. I had a feeling that she was working on keeping a smile off her face. Loony tunes, for sure. Old age is like that. Hell, she must be more than fifty. Senile, that's what they call it.

I climbed the stairs, with my hand on the banister that I must have slid down a million times. It was pretty good being a kid in this

place. She was easygoing then, I was the apple of her eye.

The door to my room was closed so that I had to knock. Mom didn't even tell me his name. No one ever told me his name and it doesn't matter. When he answered the door the light from the hall was all the light there was. It was dark in the room.

By the light from the hall I could see him and I could almost see through his skin. His yellow eyes were rimmed with red and I swear to God, his teeth were about an inch and a half long. He stood there grinning at me out of a skull covered with greenish see-through skin, his eyes blazing in the dark.

Then he stuck out a hand, as if old Sonny here would shake hands with anything that had long twisted claws on it.

"You must be Sonny." He wasn't human, he was something else.

I backed off and started running, but halfway down the stairs I tripped and fell. My ankle was twisted so bad that I had to lay there catching my breath on the front porch before I could crawl out to my car.

He came down the stairs and went into the living room. I could hear him talking to Ma.

"Your son seemed to be in a hurry."

I heard her laugh, "Why are you so kind to me? Although I do appreciate it."

"Well, to tell you the truth, you remind me of my mother."

I crawled out to my car and I haven't been back since. If she wants to live with a fiend out of hell, instead of her only son, I don't care. I wouldn't go back if she begged me.

Sometimes I think about that guy, and what bothers me is that he looked like one of our group, or anyway, he looked like we're trying to look, only he wasn't trying. Can you dig it? Ever since, I feel kind of uncomfortable about the makeup and costume. Actually, I'm kind of looking around to find a different group. I don't really dig being a Zombie anymore.

HELL IS MURKY

by JOHN ALFRED TAYLOR

They say it's nice to have a cult following. But not this kind of following. And not this cult.

Jack Hollander is on the Hollywood Freeway, heading home in the afternoon rush. The traffic report drones on the radio as he edges his old Buick in front of a purple van with gold stripes as naturally as a born Angeleno. But then, most born Angelenos aren't; they just have a few months or years on him.

The only thing that worries Jack is that, after three weeks, he feels as much a part of the landscape as a Scientologist or an orange. Already he has tasted the avocado, if not the lotus. He has had his hair bleached and styled; he has even priced a white Mercedes. All that keeps him from going completely Californian is the thought of what his friends back in Phoenix would say.

So far everything they've said has been congratulatory or cheerfully envious of his luck. When Universal Infosystems decided to reorganize (i.e. rub out) their audiovisual department, Jack hadn't been too worried. He had a marketable skill; another job would turn up. But he'd never expected to get a job so quickly, especially after the lukewarm interview at Disney. Steiner had been different, asking to keep Jack's portfolio and calling him up that night to tell him he could come to work at Optitoons any time.

As he's told Margo in his first letter, the animation industry is the easiest thing he's ever gotten into; he's never been paid more for less. "I am in Character Development and Layout, and find we do *everything* in pencil. Not only don't we ink anything, or color it—we don't even erase. And we're the only actual artists who work here. The animators are usually more mechanics than artists, and the

Ink-and-Paint people downstairs paint by number, using coded character models in which the numbers coincide with premixed colors and shades. All you have to do to work in the industry is stay inside the lines."

That's still true, though Jack's beginning to feel he earns his pay when he has to draw H.Y. Ena. Even in pencil. He doesn't mind drawing Toothpick or the Croc, doesn't mind the utter predictability of their dance of appetite, with H.Y. Ena inventing one foredoomed trick after another to bypass Croc and catch the insolently innocent bird who always takes shelter in the saurian's mouth. It's just that he's beginning to hate H.Y. Ena: the glittering malevolent eye, the spastic laugh, the anthropomorphic jauntiness of his gait.

Jack isn't going to let H.Y. Ena get to him—not with that check every week. But he does wonder what sort of mind thought up H.Y. Ena and who did the first sketches.

Smog stands like a brown wall in the valley ahead as he descends. And there wasn't any all day, back where you'd expect it; damned if he'll ever understand the weather here, where there isn't supposed to be any.

A yellow VW bug is dawdling along in the right lane, so slowly that Jack decides to pass even if his exit is only half a mile ahead, but it accelerates till he barely pulls in front of it before the turnoff, and as he leaves the freeway he sees it pass by almost on his bumper in the rearview mirror.

Jack stops at Mrs. Wrigley's to pick up his paper. She wears her usual housecoat and wraparound sunglasses. Mr. Wrigley was a Nebraskan who came out here to die, but Mrs. Wrigley has taken root and thrives in the sun.

"Is everything all right?" she says, concern in her voice. Jack wonders what she expects to happen to him, she's always asking how he is, if anything is wrong.

"Oh, yes, everything's fine."

"Remember, I'm always here if you need help." An offer she's made before; and Jack would think she had designs on him in spite of her age if she hadn't tried to sell him a subscription to *The Watchtower*.

When he opens the door of his apartment there's the scorched smell again, like the ghost of burnt feathers. The odor comes and goes, though the apartment was repainted just before he moved in and he's aired the place repeatedly since.

It's what they call a "single" out here, one room with separate kitchen and bath. All recently decorated, except for the fake Persian rug covering the damage to the wall-to-wall carpeting at one end of the room—something to do with the last tenants.

Jack sits down with a beer from the refrigerator to read the paper. They've found the man's other hand; parts of this man of indeterminate age and a girl in her twenties have been turning up behind local bars ever since Jack arrived. Every day on his way to work Jack passes the bar where a retiree hunting scraps for his dog found the first parcel: the girl's left leg and head and the man's right hand, neatly wrapped in a plastic garbage bag. Welcome to Greater Los Angeles.

What would H.Y. Ena say to that? Morbid? Negative thinking? Vitamin deficiency? Needs more sun? More orange juice? Rolfing? A hot tub? A course in yoga? No, that's not what H.Y. Ena would say. He'd want to know where he could find the next packet of carrion.

Jack laughs, catching himself laughing alone, then forgets it as he picks up his sketch pad and doodles a picture of H.Y. Ena in a disco suit gleefully opening a package with a foot sticking out. He draws another: HYE with butcher's saw. Then HYE dressing for surgery. HYE eyeing the haunches of a girl in a bikini. HYE as backyard chef. And all with that expression of gluttonous joy HYE always wears when expecting the immediate capture of Toothpick.

When he finishes the beer, he opens another and goes back to his sketching. HYE loose in the morgue, HYE attacking mounted dinosaur bones in a museum, page after page of baroque variations on hunger. The subject is too much for Jack; he stops and thaws out two minute steaks, wishing they were sirloin, and fries them with onions. He eats them by the light of the setting sun.

Jack rinses the dishes, whistling his own jazzed-up version of "Danse Macabre," and debates taking out the trash. Part of his internal debate concerns the fact that on the way home he has resolved to finally unpack the last box in the closet, and if he takes the trash out, he might as well go through with it; he's been putting it off too long, just like he's been putting off answering Margo's letter.

Very soon Jack remembers why this box isn't unpacked; it's the stuff he'd rather forget but couldn't quite throw away. The bedside astrology book from Cathy, the painting of an utterly adorable nymphet with button eyes that Sherri gave him. (Possibly HYE would find the nymphet toothsome.) Funny Margo never gave him

anything; the only girl you care for doesn't give you keepsakes, junk or otherwise. Jack ends up putting everything back and pushing the box to the rear of the closet again. But in the process discovers something he has never noticed before—a grey metal case the size of a shoe box.

When he drags it out, he finds it padlocked. Take it to Mrs. Wrigley? Maybe, if there's anything important inside.

The padlock and hasp are too strong for the tools he has, but not the hinge; using the shaft of his biggest screwdriver as a lever, he breaks it open. Inside is a package wrapped in plastic.

He almost expects a human hand, but all the plastic sheet contains is a spiral-bound stenographer's notebook, and when he opens it, the writing makes no sense, with strange letters in green ink, except for an occasional word or phrase (if that's what it is) emphasized in red. Some kind of code or cipher.

Nothing he can make heads or tails of, but there's a rust-colored decal on the cover—a design like a swastika, only much more graceful and kinetic, with only three curved arms. He remembers this design from somewhere. A coat of arms?

He's seen it more recently, though, on a yellow background. The design's got a funny name, but Jack can't remember it. Anyway, no point telling Mrs. Wrigley. He leaves the box on the table when he goes to bed.

He wakes to a commercial, the announcer's voice half-drowned in a surf of static. Snapping the clock-radio off, Jack tries to remember his dream. Nasty; it had HYE in it. And something about the box.

It must have belonged to the last tenants: a couple named Malone, according to Mrs. Wrigley. They skipped out, didn't she say?

On the way to work he sees the design again, on the side of a yellow van. He's seen vans like it since he arrived, but never noticed them consciously before. SOL INVICTIS LTD. it says in neat rust-colored lettering.

When asked about the name, Jack's stallmate Morgan Griffiths doesn't even look up from his light board. "It's a local company. They make suntan lotion."

"Is the guy really named Sol Invictis?"

"Sure. Why not?"

"Because it means 'the unconquered sun' in Latin. Something

to do with the Roman Saturnalia, their celebration of the winter solstice."

"Really? I thought it was his name."

"Truth," Jack said. "I majored in archaeology and art history."

During his lunch hour he looks Sol Invictis Ltd. up in the phone book. There it is in print, and judging from the address, the main plant is only a few miles from where Jack lives.

When he drives home the smog is waiting for him, worse than yesterday. The radio says wait for "the Santa Ana" and reminds Jack that it's illegal to throw matches or cigarette butts from cars.

On the way to his exit he passes the yellow VW bug again. The hunchbacked man in it must live around here.

The scorched smell is strong in his apartment, perhaps due to the smog; he turns the air conditioner up and opens a beer.

The box with the wrecked hinge is on the table, and he takes the notebook beside it over to the couch and looks at the indecipherable script. Only a few of the neat red and green letters look like the regular alphabet; it isn't Russian or Greek. Except for the absence of lettering, the decal is exactly the same as the Sol Invictis trademark, even the same rust red. Just coincidence, or does it mean something?

He remembers the word for three-armed swirling shapes like these. *Triskelion*—something like that. *Triskelion*, *triskele*, yes, that's it.

Jack stares at the decal until it seems to take root in his eye. When he looks away the afterimage turns in front of the off-white wall.

He watches the morning news while he eats breakfast. A brushfire up Laurel Canyon, but there's no sign of it when he drives to work, just more smog.

In the art shop people are jumpy in spite of the air conditioning. Down in the maze of Ink and Paint the straw bosses are walking back and forth like caged panthers, and just before lunch Stan Fuller comes in and tells Jack to take it easy, he's working on layout for Optitoons, not Goya's black paintings.

Jack almost snaps back at him, but is glad he didn't when he looks at the layouts Stan has returned: instead of his usual lovable but fangy grin, Croc's smile looks like he has spent millennia simmering in the cauldrons of hell. Toothpick looks both cretinous and hypocritical. And this H.Y. Ena is the beast who follows people



cursed by witch doctors through the bush at night.

"Did I do those? Must be the weather."

Morgan looks at them after Stan leaves. "Weather hell, it's innate depravity. You're as bad as Hal Schaeffer."

"Who?"

"The guy who invented H.Y. Ena. We had to cute the furry bastard up a lot from Hal's sketches."

"I never heard of him."

"Schaeffer's dead," Morgan mutters.

Still puzzled, Jack takes the offending sheets home to examine at his leisure. Peering at the drawings spread out on his kitchen table, Jack sees why Stan made that remark about Goya's black paintings; he can hardly believe they're his own work.

The scorched smell is worse. It must be the smog. Jack goes outside and looks at the Hollywood hills to the south. He can see more than one fire on the skyline, and a dense fog of smoke. So this is autumn in the Earthly Paradise.

But it is the Earthly Paradise, or a reasonable facsimile thereof. It's just that it's the fifth day of smog, and he's waiting for the Santa Ana to blow it all away. Though from what he's heard about the Santa Ana winds, the cure is worse than the disease, especially with it so dry and the sagebrush on the hills just waiting for a spark.

It's as if he's seeing by heat, not light, everything's so dim and red. Above him, the clouds—if they are clouds and not a rock ceiling—glow with reflected fire. The scorched smell is everywhere, and it comes in waves like the laughter. Jack knows that laughter. H.Y. Ena comes slouching through the darkness. Or is Jack going toward him? It's hard to tell.

H.Y. Ena sees him, jerks his head to the left: "C'mon!"

He leads Jack through the red pulsing, under the stiff clouds.

They go on for what seems seconds, or hours, before H.Y. Ena stoops and crouches over a denser shadow. The creature waits till Jack gets down on all fours beside him. The mass is wrapped in plastic garbage bags. A pallid fist, half open, juts from the bundle. H.Y. Ena begins tearing at the plastic with his claws and muzzle—

Jack wakes squatting in the dark, his fingertips sore, wondering where he is. There's just enough light coming around the blind for him to recognize the room around him. He gets up and slides over to the light switch.

That's what he was scrabbling at: the fake Persian rug is turned up at one side, and Jack can see the brown mark burned into the ivory carpet underneath. It looks like a letter or symbol of some sort—like Hebrew or Arabic.

Jack rolls the side of the rug up: a curve, an angle meeting it, another sigil. He pulls the whole rug away.

Jesus! It's a magic circle, just like in the old pictures. There's a pentagram and symbols in the angles and around the circumference. Just what were those last tenants into?

The scorch marks are very narrow, almost as if they were incised, not burned. Jack can't figure how they did it.

He'll have to ask Mrs. Wrigley about the Malones. Not too directly though, considering she never mentioned what was under the Persian rug.

It's almost Saturday noon when Jack finally goes out to his car. Even though he had surprisingly little trouble getting back to sleep, he feels stretched like an old rubber band. The Buick is covered with a fine coating of ash, and Jack thinks of Pompeii. Smoke sits on the hills to the south like a lid.

Jack had been thinking of driving up the Coastal Highway to look at a few beaches—while it's too cold for sunning, he could always walk and look at the surf and what the surf brought in—yet now he lacks the energy. Or the desire, which is the same thing. Even the trip to the supermarket seems too much, but the refrigerator is almost empty.

Jack drives out Sherman Way. Not so respectable here as further west, it has metal siding and chain-link fence dealers mixed in with the boutiques and gourmet shops. At the supermarket he spends most of his time at the vegetable bins, still not used to the marvelous freshness and variety. He goes on to the neighboring liquor store, hoping to find a very special Pinot Chardonnay that Morgan Griffiths has talked up. But he is disappointed, and goes on to the next liquor store.

Still no luck, so Jack drives down to Sherman Oaks, to the store he knows will have it. On the way he goes by the bar behind which the first package of body parts was found. Never going to stop *there* for a drink.

On the way back the yellow VW passes him on the freeway. The twisted man inside waves, but Jack doesn't recognize him.

The wine was worth the trip, Jack decides at his late lunch. He

should answer Margo's last letter, but he still feels languid. *Mañana*. He pours himself a third glass; he must remember to tell Morgan he thinks the wine is special, too.

He gets out Margo's letter to reread. At least he can think about what he's going to say . . .

When Jack wakes in the chair his leg is asleep and it's almost dark outside. So much for Saturday. He makes himself a big salad and finishes the wine for supper.

He feels restless. Even with the smog, the night buzzes with electricity; he can hear cars in the distance and a snatch of music from the ballroom a block away, but all he does is drive to the nearest drugstore to pick up a copy of tomorrow's paper. Always before, wherever he lived, he has arranged to get the Sunday New York *Times*; the Los Angeles *Times* just doesn't satisfy him, for all its bloatedness—he can go through it in less than an hour. But it's worth studying for what it can show him about the area; the ads often reveal more than the news stories.

The Home section is always interesting for its demonstrations of how to live casually on half a million, and the religious ads continue to amuse and bemuse. But tonight Jack turns the page and gasps; there is the triskelion again, the same as on the metal box and the Sol Invictis vans. *Congregation of Mithras*, says the ad. It could be just a coincidence; the design was a traditional motif in Celtic art, wasn't it? But wasn't Sol Invictis a Mithraic phrase? Have to look it up.

Jack brings out the box and compares the ad with the decal. Identical, all right. He tears out the ad to save. Tomorrow he can check on the address. Then, still restless, he decides to try the phone number in the ad, even if it is Saturday night. No loss if they don't answer.

Three rings and then the sound of a gong coming from an infinity away, from further than the acoustical inadequacies of the telephone can explain. Then a voice hard to place sexually, not so much epicene as inhumanly pure: "Seeker, this is the Congregation of Mithras. We are sorry no one can speak to you now. If you wish to leave a message, wait for the tone and then give your name and your message—"

Instantly Jack slams down the receiver. Why is he breathing so fast? What is he afraid of? Then he realizes there wasn't the usual noise and hiss of a tape starting up. That was no answering machine at the other end. But was it a person?

Jack shrinks in on himself, makes himself as small as possible: something sudden and huge is passing over, he can feel the heavy cloud of its attention. He tries to make his mind a blank because it can hear what he thinks.

"The Malones?" says Mrs. Wrigley. "Oh, they skipped out one night without paying their rent. Left most of their things, at least, so I made some back. But not what they owed."

And left the box with the notebook, too, thinks Jack—but *that* Mrs. Wrigley can do without. He walks back to his apartment with the feeling something's gone by him, something important, but what he's missed he doesn't know.

He picks up the phone on the third ring. "Hello?"

There is silence for a long second, then a click. Somebody's gotten the wrong number.

An hour later the same thing happens. Jack hangs up, looking out at the Sunday afternoon sunshine, then winces. He knows what's coming. An instant later he feels the same pressure as last night. Something enormous is looking for him, a scrutiny sweeping overhead like the beam from a lighthouse. Again he blanks his mind. But when he senses it's safe again, he has a direction: it has come from somewhere to the south.

Jack has been thinking of checking out the address of the Congregation of Mithras. Now he wonders if that's safe; won't he be going right toward the source? If it *is* the source. But it must be: all his troubles came after he tried their number and got that thing that wasn't an answering machine. But if he stays put he's pinned down, easier to find.

Finally Jack decides to stay put, though it's hard on his nerves. No point driving around to no purpose. A rhyme he learned in his youth sums it up sardonically:

*When in danger,
When in doubt,
Run in circles,
Scream and shout.*

At least there's beer in the refrigerator, and long distance on the phone; nobody can call him if he's talking to Margo, and the sound of a friendly voice would be more than welcome now.

He dials Margo's number in Phoenix, but when the phone is picked up in the middle of the first ring, the voice that answers is

inhumanly pure and sweet. Jack slams down the phone, shaking.

Outside the afternoon dwindles, the sky turns blue-black.

Jack isn't quite asleep when the phone rings. For a moment he considers the danger of answering, then picks it up.

It's Margo! "Where've you been?"

"Jesus, it's good to hear you . . ."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing, Marg. Nothing at all. Just feeling blue and lonely. Sorry I haven't answered your letter. Been meaning to for a week."

"That's why I'm calling. Where've you been for the last two hours?"

"Right here. Why?"

"Been using the phone?"

"No."

"You haven't?"

"Not at all. What's this about?"

"Listen—" Margo's voice is tight. "I got to worrying about you, wanted to talk. So I tried to call you—and the phone was busy."

"I haven't used it. The last time somebody called was around one—and they hung up as soon as I answered." He's not going to tell Margo what else happened; there's no way he can tell her.

"Okay, I believe you. But then I called and the phone rang and rang. Ten minutes later I called and the phone was busy again. Then two minutes later you didn't answer. Then I got a pizza parlor. So finally I checked with information. They said I had the right number. I had them dial it for me. And got the pizza parlor. The next time a recording told me to please dial one first. So I was careful to do it, and *still* got the recording. Then you were busy. Then a minute later nobody answered. I was dialing very carefully by now—"

"I was here all the time, Marg."

"Funny . . . But I've got you now." She laughs with relief. "You know, I almost thought somebody was trying to stop me."

"What do you mean?"

Jack grips the phone so hard it hurts.

"Oh, I don't know . . . Jack? Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, honey," Jack says. "Just fine."

Jack is trying very hard to keep Croc his lovable scaly self while he listens to Morgan. "So what do you have to do with the Congregation of Mithras?"

"Nothing. But somebody I know is mixed up with them."

"Then keep away from him," says Morgan, and Jack looks up in the cadaverous glow from his light board to see if he's serious. Morgan's expression leaves no doubt.

"Keep away? Why?"

"They're bad news."

"How come?"

"Things happen to people."

"Mob connections?"

"Nothing that makes that much sense."

"You mean like black magic, witchcraft, that sort of thing?"

"Don't mean anything," growls Morgan. "Jesus, will you look at that!" and he bends irritably over his drawing.

"How do you know?" asks Jack. "Rumors, gossip?"

"Hal Schaeffer joined."

"The guy who invented H.Y. Ena?"

"That came right *after* he joined."

"Any connection?"

"How should I know?" Morgan grunts.

"How did he die?"

"Wreck on the freeway. Burned to a crisp in his yellow VW."

This time there's more light, but the sky above is still a ceiling, the clouds stiff, frozen in space. The landscape is featureless, an infinite grey plain. The only shape on it is a faraway figure signaling Jack on.

Jack walks toward it, covering the distance with surprising quickness. It's H.Y. Ena, shuffling his feet impatiently. "Hurry up. They won't stay fresh much longer."

Jack follows him across the grey emptiness. On the far edge is a speck which slowly grows until Jack recognizes a yellow car. There's something about that yellow car—Jack tries to remember. Something unpleasant. It doesn't matter, though.

Somebody waves from the car, but when they come up to it there's nobody in it, just a jumble of freezer packages. H.Y. Ena opens the door, takes one out, rips it open with his teeth and paws. There's a hand inside. Its nails are painted red. As Jack watches, its finger crooks beckoningly. H.Y. Ena pulls out another package, hands it to him.

Jack unwraps it to find the head of a bearded man. Its eyes open and it smiles.

Jack is sitting up in bed, shuddering. The digital clock says it's

four twelve. He barely gets back to sleep before the radio comes on. Another morning in the Earthly Paradise. Outside the blue of the sky is slightly off.

On the way home Jack stops at the library and reads up on Mithraism; if his memory is correct and what Morgan implied is true, the Congregation of Mithras isn't much like the original. Sure enough. Mithraism was a rather decent mystery cult. It had been especially popular in the Roman armies. Certainly nothing sinister.

On a whim Jack goes to the card file, looks up HYENAS. They actually have a book on the beasts. Jack checks it out for two weeks.

He stays up half the night reading about H.Y. Ena's real relatives. Not exactly lovable animals, but certainly not the obscene slinkers of popular belief. A carnivore right out of the Miocene, with huge conical teeth and jaws that can crush bone. And the spotted hyena isn't always the scavenger that follows the lion; sometimes, it seems, it's the other way around, with the lion eating what the other's killed. The hyena was also supposed to be hermaphroditic. But not lovable: in the illustrations the hyena's face is frightening, not like H.Y. Ena's loony mask.

Just after midnight the phone rings. Jack doesn't answer, counting. Eleven rings before the caller gives up. Jack waits shakily, but senses no presence searching for him overhead.

Jack visits his landlady before he goes to work. "I was talking to somebody about a couple he knew around here, and I wondered if it was the Malones."

"Something bad?" asks Mrs. Wrigley.

"No, not at all." Jack grins. "He said a bearded man. And she was younger, in her twenties."

"That was them," says Mrs. Wrigley, a sibyl in sunglasses. And Jack wonders, still half inside the dream, if perhaps the Malones *didn't* skip out. Could they have been kidnapped?—and be appearing now as selected short objects in plastic wrap?

Though why should the Malones be *cut up* so thoroughly? Maybe because things were done to them before they died.

But why?

The notebook, he supposes.

You could skip out on Mrs. Wrigley, but not on the Congregation of Mithras.

The dream has left him hypersensitive, and all the way down the freeway he watches for the yellow VW bug, but to his relief

never sees it. He pulls into the parking lot of the art shop with a feeling of safety—and then notices a yellow van at the end of the row. SOL INVICTIS LTD. Not funny anymore; he grits his teeth as he goes by.

At noon the van is still there.

On a hunch he goes back to the pay phone in the hall next to the vending machines, discovers the phone book is surprisingly intact. He's not sure he remembers the address of the Congregation of Mithras correctly, so he looks it up, then looks up Sol Invictis Ltd. Not the same. But wait, right below it is the listing for Sol Invictis himself. (Whose real name is probably Billy Joe Something.) And it is the same address as the Congregation.

He walks past the van without looking and drives out, watching for it in the rearview mirror, but it doesn't follow him on the way to lunch. That's *some* relief.

Now what? How does he get these people off his back?

The yellow van is still parked in the lot when he returns, and it's hard to concentrate on his drawing. But he can draw H.Y. Ena in his sleep. Not a nice thought, considering that, in a way, it's what he's been doing these last few nights.

Going home that afternoon, Jack watches in the rearview mirror again. Again the van does not follow. But as he drives up his street, he sees another yellow van parked down the block.

Jack sits doodling in front of his tv, the picture on but the sound off. He always doodles when he has a problem; it helps him collect his thoughts, and often he doodles out a solution.

H.Y. Ena grins up at him as he takes a sip of beer. He puts down the can on the chair arm and draws a speech balloon next to the grin. *Quid pro quo*, he pencils into the balloon, then puts a large question mark after it. He traces the question mark over until it grows thick and black.

Quid pro quo? He sips his beer.

Dummy! What about the box? The notebook's in code, and nobody writes in code unless they want to keep a secret. And from the decal on the box, it has to do with that damn cult.

Next morning he calls in sick and has a leisurely breakfast while waiting till he's reasonably sure he won't be answered by somebody or something impersonating an answering machine.

Just the same, he's relieved to hear a woman's voice on the other end. "Congregation of Mithras."

"This is Jack Hollander. I'd like to talk to Sol Invictis."

"Mr. Invictis is not available, Mr.—What did you say your name was?"

"Hollander, Jack Hollander. And I've got something Mr. Invictis wants."

"I'm afraid I don't understand, Mr. Hollander."

"A box left behind by the former occupants of my apartment—people named Malone. They seem to have belonged to your organization. The box contained a notebook in code."

"Just a minute, Mr. Hollander. Will you please hold for a few seconds?"

He's getting somewhere. Though the hold is more than a few seconds.

The next voice is male. "You say you have something of ours?"

"Mr. Invictis?"

"The Invictis is in conference."

"I'll talk to him."

"Surely you can discuss it with me. I'm Alan Guterman, Hierarch of the Congregation—"

"I'll talk to Invictis."

"There's no need for this."

"I think it's a very interesting notebook. Maybe the newspapers would think so, too."

"I see. Will you hold, please?"

"For a while."

This time the wait is longer. Finally a deeper voice speaks. "This is Sol Invictis. You wanted to talk to me about a notebook?"

"Left in a closet by the Malones."

"What makes you think this notebook is related to the Congregation?"

"Because there's a decal of your congregation's emblem on the box. Because the notebook's in code, in red and green ink. And because you're talking to me about it."

"You're correct. We'll be glad to have it back. We had no idea where it was after the Malones passed over. Someone can come for the notebook whenever it's convenient."

"It won't ever be convenient."

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

"I want something in return."

"A reward? Of course. You deserve something for your trouble."

"No reward. I just want you people to leave me alone."

"Leave you alone?"

"Call your troops off."

"I don't know what you mean, Mr. Hollander."

"You know what I mean. Tell your people they can stop spying on me. And the rest."

"I really think you must come to the Mithraeum here so we can discuss this. It's the only way we can clear up this misunderstanding."

"All right," Jack says, wondering if this is a good idea.

The smog has finally broken, blown away by the Santa Ana. If this is what the Santa Ana does, as far as Jack's concerned it can blow all the time.

According to Invictis, his estate is on one of the canyons off Laurel, north of Mulholland. Judging from the map, the best thing to do is go out the Ventura Freeway.

No yellow VW again. Must have been the smog. Breathe enough of that, you start seeing things.

Jack sure hopes this is the solution. And he's taken extra insurance: gone to the post office with a half pound of dimes for the xerox machine and mailed the copy of the notebook off to Margo. He just hopes she won't think he's drunk or crazy when she reads his note. Though maybe it *is* all in his head, and only happening because he isn't fully acclimated. Once he learns to breathe smog . . .

When he starts down Laurel he sees smoke in the distance. He'd forgotten about the fires. And now, with the Santa Ana—

Jack passes fire trucks and emergency vehicles parked off the freeway, but most of the crews are gone. Up in the hills, he guesses. What he can see of the slopes looks peaceful enough, nothing out of the ordinary, although bits of ash are floating down to the road. He's watching the signs. If he remembers the map correctly, only two more to go, a right turn, and Invictis's estate is only a few hundred yards up the canyon.

But when he reaches the turnoff, there's a highway patrol car and a patrolman standing on the pavement. Jack puts on his turn signal, and the patrolman flags him down. "This road's closed to traffic. The fires are too close."

"Officer, I've got to—my sister and her husband live up there. They say they need me."

"Okay, you can go on. But be careful, the whole south slope's going."

"Right. Thank you, officer."

The south slope doesn't look too bad right now, only smoke up behind the ridge. Though the big house up there looks deserted.

Above comes a fluttering sound, and a firefighting helicopter rattles overhead to dump its chemicals behind the hill. A truck has parked on the shoulder, and men are scrambling out with shovels. One stares at Jack for an instant as he goes by.

Reassuringly, Invictis's place is on the north side of the canyon, the mouth of the road veiled by shrubs and evergreens, marked only by an impressive monolith of grey granite with the triskele on it in bronze.

Two more helicopters pass overhead.

Here goes, Jack tells himself. Even if he's walking in where angels fear to tread, he's not going to walk in carrying the box. That's locked in the Buick's trunk; not much security, but better than none.

Halfway up the slope the road bends through another planting that conceals a guardhouse built into the hillside. Jack stops at the barrier across the road. The guard who comes out is dressed in an ordinary rent-a-cop uniform, rather than the white robe Jack was half expecting.

"I'm Jack Hollander. I have an appointment with Mr. Invictis."

"Yessir." The guard raises the barrier. "Go right ahead."

Until he's almost at the top, Jack sees nothing but trees. The drive leads into a small parking lot they hide from below, with more trees blocking off the summit above. For a moment Jack doesn't notice the motionless figure in the shadows, and then the man waves. Jack parks and climbs to meet him. There are spiral designs in mosaic on the steps. The man is dark, slim, wears an expensively cut grey suit.

"I'm Alan Guterman, Mr. Hollander. You talked to me on the phone."

"Oh, yes, you're the, uh—Hierarch."

Guterman smiles. "Congratulations. So few get it right the first time."

"Easy," Jack says. "The real problem was remembering not to say 'heresiarch.'" Jack can't figure out whether Guterman's offended or doesn't know the word.

As they continue up, Jack begins to see buildings here and there—or is it just one building sprawling out over the hilltop, integrated into the landscape till it's half concealed? It's the kind of

California Modern that looks Mayan or Egyptian. Money, money, money. The Congregation of Mithras isn't just any California cult.

At the top of the steps is a court among the trees, and at the other end bulks what must be the main entrance on cult occasions, lintel and uprights massive as a dolmen and looking much like a modern attempt at one.

Guterman stops and waves Jack inside. "The Invictis is waiting for you."

"Aren't you coming?"

"The Invictis feels you would prefer to talk to him alone."

"It doesn't matter to me."

"He thinks it best."

"Well, all right." Jack goes on into the dark hall. It opens out; at the other end of the shadow space is a single flame, and beside it a man sitting alone. Invictis has a sense of style.

He stands as Jack approaches. "Thank you for coming."

"You made it sound like I'd better."

Invictis raises his eyebrow. He's tall and lean, with a shaven head, wearing a green suit and high-necked shirt patterned in green and gold. He has pale blue eyes with the whites showing all round the pupil. "And you make it sound as if you were coerced."

"Look, I came here so you could take off your watchers—all of them."

"My watchers, Mr. Hollander?"

"You know what I mean."

Invictis has a rather nasty smile. "I assure you I don't. You might as well say I'm having you watched by this." He turns to a form in the shadows behind him, adjusting the lamp on the tripod at his side. The flame shoots up, revealing a huge image that Jack recognizes from his quick study of Mithraism: a lion-headed figure with a snake coiled round it. At least here Invictis is authentic. A great stage property.

"I didn't come here to argue, I came to make a deal."

"We'd greatly appreciate your returning the notebook."

"Will you appreciate it sufficiently?"

"Meaning exactly what, Mr. Hollander?"

"Meaning enough so I'm not bothered anymore."

"I assure you we've not, ah, bothered you in any way. But we will appreciate it sufficiently." The frozen-faced bastard won't admit a thing, even when he's promising to stop it.

"So okay."

"Where is the notebook?"

"I left it in my car. I'll go down and get it."

"Thank you."

As he brings the box back up the steps, Jack thinks how easy this is, and how easy it would have been for them just to break the trunk lock if they'd known where it was. Or threaten him with violence, since he drove up alone. So Invictis means to keep his bargain, even if he won't admit there's anything to bargain about.

He's waiting in the doorway. Jack opens the box and hands him the spiral notebook. Invictis opens it, flips the pages. "We're very pleased to get this back."

"Just so you show your appreciation."

"I promise you, Mr. Hollander."

"By the way, I've taken out a little insurance."

"Oh?"

"I xeroxed the notebook and sent a copy to a friend in case anything happens to me."

"An unnecessary precaution. But understandable." Invictis smiles. "Still, one wonders what your friend will make of it."

"Then we're square?"

"Quite. Drive carefully on the way home." For a second Jack feels disoriented, as if he's being watched by someone in the dark hall, but all he can see past Invictis's shoulder is the lion-headed image. Now if it were hyena-headed—

"What about you up here?"

"The fire will never reach here." Invictis speaks with assurance, as if this is fact rather than assertion.

But Jack's not so sure when he drives out from under the trees and has a clear view of the other side of the canyon. Fire is leaping across the bushes at the top, and a helicopter stoops almost into the column of smoke and flame to drop its chemicals with no visible effect.

"You be careful," says the guard.

"You too."

"Mr. Invictis says it's safe."

At the bottom Jack races down the canyon, keeping one eye on the slope to his left. A furnace wind sucks the air out of the car window, and the roar of the fire is deafening. A clump of laurels halfway up the slope explodes into flame, autumnal red sumac catches, the fire licks toward him in a blur. The flames are going straight up in a transparent whirl; it's a goddamn firestorm! A shower of sparks

and burning twigs falls onto the road and lands on his hood.

And then Jack is through and the sparks blow off the hood, leaving it barely scorched.

The patrolman at the mouth of the canyon gives him a mock salute of relief and waves him by.

Jack heads north toward Ventura, having done what he set out to do. Invictis has his notebook, and knows there's a xerox. He'll keep his promise, won't he? Invictis is no fool. Though explaining this to Margo will be quite a job. The smog is gone, and he's safe, even if the Santa Ana's blowing and ashes will be all over his car again next morning. No more jittering in the middle of the night, no more wincing at the ringing of the phone.

North Hollywood here I come, right back where I started from.

It's still the lunchtime rush hour when he reaches the freeway, but Jack doesn't mind at all, merging and shifting unconcernedly.

Then he sees yellow in the rearview mirror, and remembers Invictis's pale blue eyes, his equivocal smile. The yellow bug is creeping up to pass.

It pulls alongside, and Jack stares as the driver turns and waves.

H. Y. Ena, his monstrous jaw open in a yellow grin.

During rush hour on the freeway, one never changes lanes without looking. The driver of the semi in the right lane has no chance to brake, and Jack sees nothing, has no time to scream, feels only the last shattering impact.

His gas tank explodes, and the yellow bug skitters away under the rising fireball, under the brassy sky.

Cruising

by DONALD TYSON

The girls in the Chevy were
a pair of sultry sirens . . .
and he wasn't one to resist.

Tires shrieked on sun-baked asphalt, and the music of a car radio emptied itself across the quiet city intersection. Inside the car Johnny Sheen tapped his fingers impatiently on the steering wheel and looked up at the red light. He was bored. Aching for something to happen. It was a summer Sunday afternoon, and the streets of the city were like lanes through a graveyard.

Sheen was young and tough — what they call street smart. He had never read a book, but he knew what he wanted from life. His hair was razored in a spiky punk look and he wore mirror shades to hide his eyes. Drove a '78 Camaro with custom flame painted on the sides. Days he worked as a mechanic in a garage to earn enough for the upkeep on the car. Nights and weekends he cruised the streets. Cruising for action was his life.

An old Chevy sedan pulled up beside him in the fast lane. He gunned his engine and looked across with the faint mocking smile that never left his lips. Two teenage girls with long greasy hair and t-shirts sat in the front seat of the Chevy. His eyes measured the car professionally. Dented and covered with dust, it had come a long way. The windows were rolled down against the heat. He noticed a steel ring around the roof column, probably to keep the front door shut, and a line of ugly red decals on the front fender.

The brunette, who sat nearest him, looked over archly at the sound of his engine. Johnny smiled, knowing she could not read his eyes. She leaned over to the blond driver and whispered into her ear, then glanced back at him. The blonde looked and laughed.

The light went green. He let them win and fell in behind, stalking them with animal patience. This was his game and he always came out on top in the end. They looked like sluts, but he was in no mood to be critical. Sunday afternoon was slow. He followed close and drafted them around a corner, the tires of both cars screaming. The brunette waved her hand at him through the dusty rear window, laughing, as the driver wove her way through the light traffic. Sheen stayed on her bumper, his interest growing. She might be a slut, but she drove like a bitch.

Another red. He swerved right and pulled close beside the Chevy, the music from his radio pacing his pulsebeat. The faces of the girls were flushed with excitement, the driver's red mouth cruel as she raced her engine. Laughing wildly, her friend reached across through the open window of the Camaro and caressed Sheen's cheek. He took her finger into his mouth and bit it lightly, then leaned out of the car and met her lips with his in a bruising kiss that was broken abruptly as the blonde raced through the changing light.

Cursing, Sheen opened his four-barrel and went after them. The Chevy was a sleeper with dual pipes and big inches under the beaten metal, but the Camaro pulled even as the girls got held up in traffic. Waiting for an open stretch, he swung in close beside and reached through the window of the Chevy with both cars moving fast. Tauntingly the brunette let him touch her breast, then pulled away across the seat. The blonde cut the Chevy left and Sheen followed, his nerves tingling as his eyes flicked between the road ahead and the wicked faces beside him.

Once again he reached through the window of the other car. Something hard closed on his seeking arm. He looked across and saw a shining steel ring around his wrist, a short chain trailing from it to a similar ring around the roof column. The brunette held a key up by her face and shook it in front of him like a little bell. Leaning forward to watch, the driver smiled and trailed the tip of her tongue wetly over her lips.

It was a second before he understood. Then he felt a fear so naked that his stomach churned and his throat constricted and his skin went cold in the summer heat. He began to stop his car and hesitated, foot over the brake, realizing that he could not. As the Camaro slowed, the steel chain of the handcuffs pulled tight and sent a stab of pain lancing down his left arm. He carefully pressed the gas and matched speed with the Chevy.

The cruel smile left the face of the blond driver and was replaced

by calculation. The other watched him breathlessly. With deliberate skill the blonde swung the Chevy in slow curves from side to side, careful to let the Camaro keep pace. Sheen shouted and begged, forced to use every fraction of his skill to control the distance between the cars. His eyes flicked to the speedometer. Forty-five. The Chevy began to accelerate.

Ahead in the right lane was a slow-moving car that grew rapidly as they overtook it. Desperately Sheen swung into the Chevy, trying to force it wide to the left. Metal shrieked on metal as the doors ground against each other, but the old sedan was like a rock on the road. Pulling away, he tried to climb out his open window, almost lost the Camaro, and fought frantically to regain control. The girl with the key to the handcuffs leaned over and playfully bit one of his fingers.

Sheen never felt it. As the Chevy swerved to pass the slow car, drawing him tight against his door, time jammed like a single frame of film in a projector. He saw the looming rear of the slow car ahead; the excited, soulless faces watching him. For the first time he noticed that the line of decals under the road dust on the fender of the Chevy were tiny red hands broken off at the wrists and dripping blood.

Then time started up again and Johnny Sheen screamed.

The Thing from the Slush

by GEORGE ALEC EFFINGER

The perfect horror tale for any writer who's ever received a rejection slip — and for any editor who's ever sent one.

Courane began his brisk stride even before the elevator doors opened completely to let him into the office. By the time the secretary looked up, he was already striding manfully, purposefully, resolutely across the deep blue shag. The secretary was the only reason for his determined air; there was nothing urgent waiting for him in his little cubicle. The secretary's name was Miss Weber. She was some dish. She had been hired to replace Miss Bryant, who had been carried away screaming after being asked to appear in another one of these stories.

There was, in truth, nothing urgent waiting in Courane's office, but that is not to say that what *did* wait wasn't desperate, maniacal, and overwhelming in number. They were manila envelopes, all addressed to Sandor Courane, Associate Fiction Editor, *Awesome Stories*. There were piles of envelopes, and each one had inside—like a gooey cream filling no adult human could safely consume—a short story. Maybe an epic of adventure or suspense or fantasy, but probably not. Probably the envelope contained a dog-eared manuscript—a third carbon of a high school English class assignment or some wrenching personal disclosures carved into paper with a Prussian blue crayon—that was neither exciting or even interesting. It was infrequent that Courane received anything that was in truth even fiction; it was even rarer when he got something Awesome. The title of his magazine was in some respects a misnomer, but a venerable one. That made it all right.

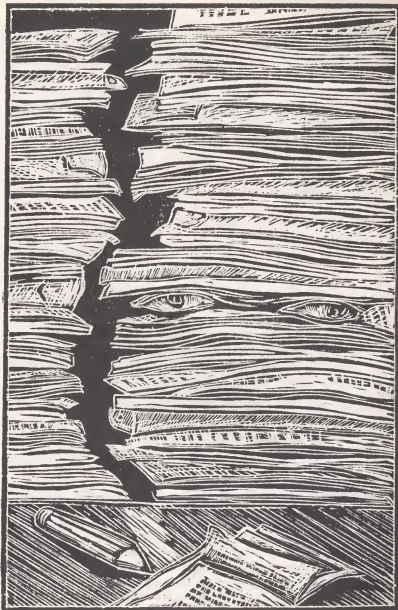
But all of this did not depress Sandor Courane. No, because he had come to understand something very important about his job as

associate fiction editor: He had not been hired to ferret out gems of literature. He had not been hired to encourage struggling, talented writers out in the broad, comma-free precincts of our land. Sandor Courane had been hired to do only one thing with the immense mountain of terrible fiction that arrived each day. He had been hired to make it go away again.

What he faced was what is known in the trade as the slush pile. That referred to the vast accumulation of stories which, despite the Post Office, stacked up and towered up and made mounds in the editorial offices in the same way as mounds were built by the ancient Indians of Ohio, and for much the same reasons. A story may be submitted in one of three ways. An established professional author may send a story to his or her agent, who then passes it on in a nicer envelope with a more, shall we say, *imposing* cover letter (all of which the author will pay for handsomely later, but this is an author/editor story, and we don't want to mix up author/agent stories with it, not without complimentary Thorazine, at least). Or the author may simply send the story directly to the editor, particularly if they are already acquainted professionally or in some equally transactional manner. Now, the third method, and the most common, is for some poor Joe from Hannibal, Missouri, to package up what he believes to be the greatest short story since H. G. Wells's "The Congealed Prawn." Joe sends his story off with little idea of where it is going or what is going to happen to it once it gets there. He thinks that Ring Lardner and Dorothy Parker and Robert Benchley and Maxwell Perkins and Gertrude Stein are going to sit around at the Algonquin and discuss his little bit of literary effluvia. Well, sadly, that is not precisely what is going to eventuate.

They used to say that unsolicited manuscripts were "thrown over the transom." God only knows why. Sandor Courane didn't even have a door on his office, let alone a transom. He was thirty-four years old before he even looked up "transom" in the dictionary; he always thought the phrase had something to do with forming a rewarding relationship with a publisher, like getting married by jumping over a hoe or something.

Well, on this Monday morning there were three hundred and forty envelopes, all filled with hope and tripe in equal measure. You see, all the promising stories—the ones from reputable agents or professional authors with familiar names—all those had been selected from the stack before Courane even arrived, and the Editor himself, who had a large office with a door and a window and a



shelf of awards shaped like Robbie the Robot, was chuckling to himself and weeping and being enriched by new experiences of the human condition, but rejecting most of the truly fine pieces of writing because "they just didn't fit his current needs." His most urgent current need was finding out if Miss Weber, the secretary, lived alone, and all this laughing and crying was keeping him from making any progress at all on that front. But, generously, we will pass over value judgments here, as we did before, because the point of this present tale is entertainment and not enmity. Still, we know of a tiny, neglected bit of the Old Testament, in Leviticus or one of those books nobody ever reads, where it warns against the sins of the editor, and indicates that we writers will have the last laugh. We usually do.

Therefore it was with a deep, heartfelt, weary sigh that Sandor Courane lunged into the pools of literary branchwater that had formed in his cubicle. If ever he were to see his desk again, or its contents, or have any hope of paying his rent this month, or of finding out himself about Miss Weber, then he would have to make these manuscripts disappear. In the early days of his employment he toyed with the idea originated by the Italian postal service. When they got too far behind and couldn't deliver the vast backlog of letters and parcels entrusted to their care, they bravely admitted their defeat and dumped the entire load into the sun-drenched Adriatic and started over again. But Courane had dismissed that idea; it was unworthy, for he had taken a pledge upon becoming a professional author himself that he would respect another man's right to make his own depredations upon our common language.

The first envelope was addressed simply to AWESOME STORIES. The nebbish who had sent in this masterpiece hadn't even bothered to look for a person's name on this magazine's masthead. Often, stories were submitted by people who had never even *read* the magazine; it was distressing how often Courane waded through dog stories or true confessions or collections of recipes. But this story seemed at first to belong at *Awesome*. It was a tale about the world after a nuclear holocaust (he persisted in spelling the word "nucular," a pronunciation he had no doubt adopted from a particular aide to a particular Southern president in recent years). Of course, everyone knows that at least a few stories about this situation have already been written, and even made into movies with special effects and torn clothing, but a good slush pile reader knows that there is really no such thing as an idea too old or too worn

that cannot be made fresh and new by a bit of genius. The story was about this guy who wandered around Newark, New Jersey, after everything had been blown to smithereens, and not very much happened. There was nobody to talk to, so the character mused aloud to himself all the time; but, given the circumstances, who can really object to that? The hero fought off a giant sewer alligator that had followed him from New York City, and he fought a pack of mutant rats and a few other things. Then he met a girl. They looked at each other, knowing full well what was going to happen later, offstage. "My name is Adam," he said.

"My name is Eve," she said.

End of story. With a motion whose deftness would have brought a gasp from Miss Weber, Courane clipped on a rejection slip: *Your story has been given personal consideration but is not suitable for publication in our magazine at this time. Because of the great quantity of submissions we receive, we are sorry that we cannot respond in a more personal manner.* The writer had thoughtfully included a return envelope and postage and so, just like that, this story vanished from the little corner of the publishing world forever.

Three hundred thirty-nine more to go. Most of the time, Courane didn't need to read the whole story to make a decision; sometimes he could judge from the illiteracy of the opening paragraphs that the remainder of the story wasn't worth bothering about. But the second manuscript he picked up had been sent in by Edmund Schooner Threadwell, a force to be reckoned with. Edmund Schooner Threadwell had a longing to be a writer that surpasseth all understanding. He turned out short stories the way vending machines in the drugstore produce plastic eggs with little toys in them. He sent in at least two or three stories to *Awesome* every week. Courane looked at this new one with mixed feelings; Threadwell was marginally talented, but as yet he hadn't written anything good enough to pass along to the Editor for final decision. Courane had taken to handwriting encouraging comments on the rejection slips, to lift Threadwell out of the mire of slush that surrounded him. What Courane wanted to say, his better sense forbade him. He wanted to quote possibly the most marvelous response any critic ever gave an aspiring writer, what Samuel Johnson said to a young man after reading the kid's stuff: "Your manuscript is both good and original; but the part that is good is not original, and the part that is original is not good." Now, some

cynical readers will claim that this story created Edmund Schooner Threadwell as just such a mediocre-to-poor writer only so that we could drag in that really neat quotation. Well, it's simply not true, and the ghastly, horrifying event that will occur in the next few pages will bear this out. But there are always the scoffers and doubters, and this is the price we must pay for literary celebrity.

The Threadwell manuscript was entitled: "The Cellini Salt Cellar." It started off well enough:

"What a crazy boy he is!" smiled Carolyn as she walked down the long, narrow, white gravel-paved pathway to the Liberal Arts Building, which stood like a great angry red demon among the ancient oaks which have given this university the nickname "Tulane of the North." She had just had lunch with a friend, a boy from her home town named Bill Taylor. Bill was handsome and serious, yet he had a way of making her laugh, which was why she thought often about becoming intimate with him, but he had inadvertently knocked over the salt shaker on the table. Carolyn had thought nothing of it, but Bill acted very strangely. He threw a pinch of salt over his shoulder, swept the rest away, closed his eyes, and recited some inaudible incantation. "How amusing!" Carolyn had thought. But later, after they had parted with many mutual expressions of fondness, she remembered something he had said to her only the day before.

"You have to look out for the tableware in the U.C.," he had warned her, with what she had thought was an amusing imitation of desperation in his voice. At the time, she had thought it had been just another of his lighthearted jests. Now, however, she wasn't so sure. She decided to discuss the matter with Old Mose, the kindly, wise, white-haired old janitor of Ruggles Dormitory.

From there it went rapidly downhill in a contrived way and developed into a horror story about a curse that had been placed upon an elaborate salt cellar fashioned by the great Italian goldsmith Benvenuto Cellini (1500-1571). The curse itself had been an error, because it had been laid down by a mad philosophy student in Prague or from Prague (Threadwell didn't make this clear) who had mistaken the artifact for something else entirely. How the Cellini masterpiece became involved with the college cafeteria salt shaker was too incredible even for the readers of *Awesome* to swallow, and how Bill Taylor became involved in the matter was never adequately explained. In any event, it turned out that Old Mose, the

janitor, had once done some small service for Madame Blavatsky herself and had been given by her a lucky amulet, which saved all their lives in a denouement of great terror and modifiers. The end result was that Carolyn learned how strong and resourceful Bill Taylor was (even though he would have been chopped liver without the old janitor's mojo), and also she changed her major from French to Elementary Education.

Courane absolutely hated the story. It didn't have the slightest redeeming feature, except a mildly titillating section between a creature of pure evil and a walk-on coed who *did* become chopped liver shortly thereafter. So he clipped on the regular rejection slip, but felt obliged to pen a few words; he had established that precedent and now he felt sorry. "Glad to see this," he wrote. "In the future, you might want to cut down on the adjectives." He was going to say further that the young man should study the stories that were published in *Awesome* and its competitors, but he supposed Threadwell was doing that already. Many of his stories were lifted in whole or in part from the best material appearing in the field. He always showed good taste in his thievery.

Courane yawned and looked at his watch. He had been at work for fifteen minutes and read two stories. It seemed like a reasonable time to take his first break. He went out to get a cup of coffee and pass a few witticisms by Miss Weber, but he was disappointed to see that her desk was unattended. Maybe she was in an important meeting with the Editor, laughing or weeping with him, deciding the fate of the novel in America, or something equally vital. Courane shrugged, poured himself a cup of lukewarm coffee, and went back to his cubicle. He sat down and selected a story, tore open the envelope, and put the manuscript, "My Most Unforgettable Night of Sheer Horror," down in the tiny clearing he had made among the stacks. The first step he took in critically appraising the story was to spill the cup of coffee all over it. He jumped up swearing and tried to mop up the coffee with the discarded envelope. He went out and got a handful of paper napkins and did the best he could, but "My Most Unforgettable Night" was a sodden ruin. Courane gave a sad little smile, clipped a rejection slip to the limp, marinated pages, and tucked them into the return envelope. It sailed through the air into the large brown Out box. In a way, it was a shame there wasn't an endless river of coffee in the outer office; it would speed up his job enormously.

The next story came from a person in Brazzaville, the capital of the People's Republic of the Congo. All that Courane knew about Brazzaville was it was where Humphrey Bogart and Claude Rains talked about going at the end of *Casablanca*. It had taken several months for the envelope to wend its way from the heart of darkness to Courane's desk on the Great White Way, and it was in rugged condition. Making sure that no coffee remained in his small work space, he pulled the typewritten pages out of the envelope and glanced curiously through the cover letter. "Dear Sirs," the author began. "I have always had a yen to write, but being a missionary doctor has left me with little time for such pleasures. Yet I always felt that I had a few little shreds of wisdom that I might pass on, particularly since my work has taken me to many of the more fascinating and out-of-the-way spots on our globe. I hope you enjoy reading the enclosed story, and I will be waiting enthusiastically for your reply. Yours sincerely, Dr. Francis X. Misouke"

For five, maybe ten seconds, the story captured Courane's imagination. To tell the truth, it was Dr. Misouke's cover letter that intrigued him. Courane frankly expected a story of some exotic nature, something with an exciting foreign flavor, nothing he would be able to use in the magazine, of course, but at least a change of pace from the usual run of pieces set in New York or Los Angeles. A weakness of beginning writers is that often they resist writing about the very things they know most about, and prefer instead to make great galloping intermigrations into places and situations that only show up their profound ignorance.

To this extent, Courane was gratified; the story was set in a small native village in the northeast of Brazzaville. It was about a salt shaker left behind by Henry Morton Stanley that was now possessed by the spirit of a terrible tribal demon. Rather than creating some Old Mose character, which in this instance would have really been coals to Newcastle, Dr. Misouke's hero saved everyone's life by reciting about an hour's worth of Holy Scripture.

"Well," thought Courane as wrote out a note to the Congolese author, "that certainly is a coincidence."

Hours passed; stories cried out at being from their envelope untimely ripp'd; they shivered naked beneath Courane's merciless scrutiny, then retired, meek and submissive, to their purgatorial fate in the big brown box. By lunchtime, Courage had read over a hundred stories. Seven of them had been about haunted salt shakers; he found that unusual.

It was unusual, to say the least, to receive so many stories on a similar storyline. It's all well and good to say that there's nothing new under the sun; and authors speak all of the time of picking story ideas out of the air, so that two writers in different places in different circumstances may suddenly respond to the same combination of news items, pop song lyrics, specials at the A & P, or whatever else it is that seduces inspiration. There are many instances of well-respected professionals turning out stories of identical themes with no plagiarism or even discussion between them. That is coincidence. Seven salt shakers before lunch, now, *that* was something else.

And it got worse.

Courane went to a lunch at a little place on East Fifty-Ninth Street that served the best veal parm in town. All the first readers (as they called themselves) in the New York publishing world ate there, and when he entered the restaurant they greeted him warmly and fraternally. He was young and bright and cheerful, and none of his own novels had done any better than theirs, so he was well-liked. He sat down at a table across from Norris Page, who read the slush pile for Cipher books. His job was a little different from Courane's; novel submissions were, of course, longer, bulkier, and more time-consuming. Yet Page approached them in exactly the same way, by looking briefly at the first chapter, maybe the second chapter, then flipping to the end. A lot of the time the last line was "'And my name is Eve,' she said," and it made decisions very simple. But one time in a hundred there was a good book lurking in the pile; and Page was proud of two novels that he had discovered, recommended to his boss, seen through all the editorial decision-making, and, at last, watched proudly as they sprang forth, fully armed, into the world. It was a matter of some irony that one of these books had beaten out one of Page's own for a Robbie the Robot Award the year before.

"Read any good stories lately?" asked Page, after Courane ordered his lunch.

Courane winced. "Not one all morning that I could pass up the ladder. You've never seen such a pile of pure muck."

Page shrugged. "I know the feeling. I wanted to save this one book to show you. It was a classic. In only a hundred and fifty pages, this guy managed to drag in every single cliché in the business, and still have time left over for a great adolescent wish-fulfillment love interest and a surprise ending where it turns out the

characters haven't been people at all but giant mutant vegetables living in what was once New York City following the destruction of civilization. And guess what the names of the boy vegetable and the girl vegetable were."

Courane just raised a weary hand. "Why would you think I'd want to take a look at something like that? I get enough aggravation. Just today—" Courane paused; a fugitive thought made him shiver with something like fear, but he couldn't bring it clearly into focus. "Norris, have you ever noticed that sometimes stories will come in batches? Like one day you'll have a lot of UFO stories and another day you'll have a lot of hollow earth stories?"

Before Page could answer, Howard Glessman spoke up. He was sitting at the next table; he was the first reader for a line of books that everyone else in the restaurant considered far below theirs in quality. In fact, Glessman's publisher seemed to think his audience consisted of casually literate people with the intelligence of simple sponges or coelenterates. "It happens all the time, all the time," said Glessman. "And it's something you have to watch out for. It's *not* just harmless coincidence. You can't just pass it off. It means that there's something happening in the collective unconscious, that the great mass mind is mulling something over, and if you're smart you'll go along with it."

Courane and Page exchanged knowing looks. Glessman had been a reader for the same publisher for twenty-seven years, and it was common knowledge that more than a little of the slush he had waded through had seeped upstairs and irreparably affected his powers of reason. When he used phrases like "collective unconscious," the others immediately disregarded anything that he said afterward. Glessman got up and took his bill to the cashier. Courane looked after him. "Twenty-seven years," he said, fear and wonder in his voice.

"It shows, though, doesn't it?" said Page. "I heard how he got his job in the first place. The publisher needed a slush reader, so he dug a deep pit in front of the office on Fifty-Fourth Street, and covered it with branches and shrubbery. Then he put up a big sign that said, 'Warning! This is a trap!' And if anyone was dumb enough to come along, read the sign, and still fall into the pit, he was perfect material to read the kind of submissions they get."

"That can't be true," said Courane, but he had heard stranger stories and many of them *had* been true. "I brought it up because I had seven stories this morning, all about salt shakers possessed by

the devil or cursed or something like that. *Salt shakers*. That was just too weird."

"It happens," said Page with a shrug. "A statistical quirk."

"Well," said Page, "I got to go. I just can't wait to get back to the office and see what else is in that stack."

"I'll bet." Courane left with his friend, and they parted outside the restaurant. Page could walk back to work, but Courane had to take a crosstown bus.

There were five more salt shaker stories in the afternoon's reading, bringing the total to twelve. Each time a manuscript looked like it was heading off in the direction of silverware or receptacles of condiments of any kind, Courane's heart began to beat faster. His face broke out in a cold sweat, and he had several other symptoms which he had often read about but never before experienced. At last, well past suppertime, he had disposed of the last of the three hundred forty manuscripts. Twenty or so had been good enough for him to put in a special pile for the Editor to read, and the others were even now mixed together in the Out box like the offensive and defensive squads of the absolute worst football teams in the NFL: beneath it all a fumble may have taken place, but it was almost not worth it to sort through the whole mess to find out. It was Courane's supreme good fortune that he didn't have to, because that was the Post Office's duty, which may well explain several things about their attitude.

Ten days later, with the salt shaker-story phenomenon all but forgotten, he was slashing his way through the morning's produce (sometimes he thought of his cubicle as a kind of old-fashioned farmer's market, where people brought the fruits of their gardens to offer them for sale and, at the end of the day, when none of it had brought a profit, the stuff could at least be trundled home and thrown on the compost heap to enrich the next crop), and there was another story from Edmund Schooner Threadwell. Courane groaned. "My lucky day," he thought. This one had a brief cover letter; Threadwell had taken to speaking to Courane in a very conversational, friendly way, as if they were well-acquainted, which, in a manner of speaking, they were, although they had never met in person.

"Dear Sandy," said the letter. "Sorry that the Cellini story didn't work for you. Here is my latest. I call it 'The Werewolf in the Garden.' It's kind of my first real approach at humor, although on

another level it's basically a mordant tale of innocent evil, and I hope you like it. I was inspired by reading Thurber all afternoon and then going out to the Loew's Nadir for a midnight double feature of Lon Chaney, Jr. in *The Wolf Man* and Harold Lloyd in *Safety Last*, so what resulted was either going to be what you're about to read or a story about Maria Ouspenskaya climbing the outside of a brick building in California. I don't think I've ever thanked you for your interest in my stories; some of the editors at the other magazines have been less than kind. But I can't emphasize how important it is to me that one of these stories gets accepted soon. My friends have decided to—"

Courane never learned what Threadwell's friends had decided to. He was unmoved by cover letters, by threats, by pleadings, by bribes, by offers of physical intimacy, by whatever the unpublished writer might include to overcome the weakness intrinsic to the manuscript itself. It rather disappointed him that Threadwell would descend to such tactics; he had hoped the young man was above all that. When it came right down to it, the whole game rode on the story. It didn't make any difference how neatly it was typed or how desperate its author's plight; if the story worked, it lived, and if it didn't, no amount of cover letter CPR could enliven it.

"The Werewolf in the Garden" was not so bad as "The Cellini Salt Cellar" had been, and was, in fact, only unmemorable. Or it *would* have been unmemorable except that fully seventeen stories of virtually identical nature kept reminding him of it during the rest of the day. All the discomfort he had experienced during the salt shaker coincidence returned, heightened, deepened, and intensified. Courane realized that it had been a Threadwell that started both synchronic runs of stories. It was unnatural. It defied mathematics, it defied reason, it defied Courane's fundamental beliefs in the way the writing profession operated. He began to give little shrieks that afternoon, every time a new supernatural-creature-in-the-garden story revealed itself. After lunch, Miss Weber became concerned and ducked in after each little shriek, but Courane told her it was nothing to worry about, that he had ordered something else for lunch instead of his usual, and that he was merely going into oregano shock. Miss Weber's fears were calmed, but not his own. It was seven o'clock when Courane finished his day's work, and he left the office in a dazed and sickly state. He didn't go directly home, but joined Norris Page for a few medicinal Bombay gin and tonics.

"I think I've had it," Courane confessed into his drink. He was addressing the floating piece of lime.

"You've got to stick it out. We all go through this." Page was Courane's best friend and only real confidant.

"No, Norris, I don't think I can face it any more. I can't look at another paragraph of that—"

Page grabbed Courane by the lapels and spun him around. His face, already dark in the darkness of the bar, darkened some more. "Listen, Sandy," he shouted, "do you want all the rest of them to say you didn't have the *guts*? That when the chips were down, you didn't have *the right stuff*? That you don't even measure up to somebody like . . . like Howard Glessman?"

That was a low and cruel blow, but it was just what Courane needed. "You're right," he murmured. He turned back to his drink, had five more, and in the morning everything was fine again.

And things remained fine for a week, for ten days, for two weeks. He read the everlasting stories, pleased now and then when he discovered a good one. There were no more unusual coincidences. His lunches with the gang were rewarding, Miss Weber seemed more interested in his well-being than in exercising her emotions with the Editor, and all in all it began to seem that this little history was working its way toward a happy and terror-free conclusion. But Sandor Courane could not know what sort of forces had allied themselves against him, and so he went on blithely, day to day, as if his fate were not in the hands of a young man at a typewriter.

The story arrived at the *Awesome* office on the day after Labor Day. It had been almost a month since Edmund Schooner Threadwell had sent anything in, and Courane wondered if that meant Threadwell had given up at last, packed it in and joined the Navy, or found a job in a useful line of work more secure than fiction writing. Courane had already read scores of stories on that fateful September day, and had rescued only one from the ravenous Out box. The editor had left early to attend a special ceremony for a senile old fud who, fifty years before, used to write stories about forces man should not tamper with. Miss Weber had evanesced like a wraith precisely at five o'clock. Courane was all alone in the *Awesome* suite. The lights were off in the outer office. It was still and silent, yet the evening was filled with tiny noises: the buzzing and clicking and tiny tapping that mean nothing and grow only to fill the absence of human occupancy. There were eight manuscripts

left for Courane to read. The next one was the Threadwell. Courane closed his eyes and massaged his temples. He wondered if he had the sheer resolve to endure it; he considered briefly leaving the Threadwell story and the others until the next day. But in the morning there would be another heavy blizzard of stories, and he would blame himself for his laziness. So he sliced open the envelope and took out Threadwell's latest.

"Dear Sandy," went the cover letter, "how sad it makes me that you sent back 'The Werewolf in the Garden.' I think I lavished more time and effort on that story than on any other, except this one. It is called 'The Vengeance of the Acolyte,' for reasons that will soon be clear. Well, this is the last story of mine that you will be reading, so I can't help feeling just a touch of sentiment, but I've made my decision and I'll stick with it. I hope you enjoy the story."

The Vengeance of the Acolyte
by Edmund Schooner Threadwell

Brick Stafford sat at his desk, alone in the offices of *Vapid Stories*, a magazine that published mediocre fiction aimed at a mediocre audience. It was Stafford's job to make a first examination of all the stories submitted to publication, and to determine which of them deserved further consideration.

Courane's eyebrows raised as he read the first two pages. This new story was a surprise, a departure from Threadwell's usual grotesque idea of what constituted entertaining reading. It was also surprising how clearly the young man visualized the setting—which, by the way, was just like Courane's office down to the last detail. The story moved along slowly, describing Brick Stafford, describing his fatigue, mentioning the frustration inherent in his job and his lonely life and his own career. Threadwell had never before bothered very much about characterization and motivation, essential story elements that he had always sacrificed in favor of poor prose. All the slush readers knew Threadwell; their verdict was that he might not be good, but he was lengthy. If anyone ever started a magazine or an anthology called *Loquacious Tales*, Threadwell's fortune was made.

"This is just awful," thought Brick Stafford, as he pinned a rejection slip on the tenth story of the morning. "It's just like all the others. It *can't* be a coincidence. All ten stories have been about shape-changing alien

creatures kidnapping famous Hollywood movie-music composers! And yesterday, all the stories were about invasions of vampire pillows. I wonder what it all means . . ."

"Why," thought Courane, "the character in this story has asked himself many of the same questions *I've* asked in the last few weeks."

In the days that followed, Brick Stafford ignored the repeated warnings. He kept a journal, noting the days when stories arrived in groups related by plot. He gathered quite a bit of information, yet he still didn't understand its ultimate meaning. And, of course, no one else would believe him or even listen to him, and nowhere did he get any sound advice.

Courane's hands began to perspire. His mouth was dry, and he could hear the blood rushing through his ears. He turned the pages, and they rustled in his trembling hands.

But Brick Stafford was not the kind of man to run from such a threat. If they thought they could intimidate him, he'd make them pay dearly. He went on with his work, as distasteful as it now was to him. The clock ticked on; it was night in the great city, and Stafford was alone among ten million people, one courageous but foolish man in an empty tower of concrete and glass. He heard the chime that signaled the arrival of the elevator on his floor. "Who could that be?" he wondered.

The chime of the elevator sounded from beyond Courane's cubicle. "Who could that be?" he wondered.

"And I'm sure there's some significance to the fact that these stories come in groups," thought Stafford, as he drank his coffee, "but perhaps I'll *never* learn precisely what it all means." As yet he was unaware of the three visitors that had found their way into the *Vapid* offices. There was the slush-thing, a creature of slime and filth that slid and slithered across the deep blue shag of the outer office. There was the great robot, a mechanical behemoth that creaked and whirred with evil intent. And there was the young man who controlled them, a good man driven by deprivation and scorn to seek revenge against those who ignored him.

Courane tried to swallow, but he couldn't. He listened. There

were no sounds from the outer office. There were no sounds at all, except a kind of wet *slishing*, a kind of regular, jangly grating, and what his imagination told him was low, dreadful, wry laughter. Surely it was only his imagination. He read on.

In the morning, Miss Johnson found his remains. She screamed and collapsed, and later, when the police investigators arrived, she was taken by ambulance to a hospital where she was treated for shock. She was never the same again. But, then, neither was Brick Stafford. Detective Rogers had never seen anything so gruesome in all his years on the police force. "And there are no clues at all," he muttered. "Nothing but this disgusting wet trail on the carpet, and these loose screws. We'll never figure this one out."

Courane finished the story and took a deep breath. Threadwell had hit too close to home with that one. It had interfered with Courane's objectivity; he had let himself get emotionally involved with old Brick Stafford, but nevertheless the story wasn't any better than any of Threadwell's previous attempts. He reached for a rejection slip. He heard a clank, a gush, and a low-pitched snicker. "Naw," he thought as he clipped on the rejection, "it couldn't be."

The Dark

by BENJAMIN GLEISSER

Whatever it was that inhabited Station Twelve, it was evil. And contagious.

Lena Vargas, head nurse on the twelfth floor of the psychiatric wing of City Hospital, sat in the hospital cafeteria with a cold cup of coffee. This late at night she liked her coffee cold and bitter; each cup, a swallow of sour earth, kept her awake.

Three-fourths of the cafeteria was dark. Even in her section the yellow plastic chairs were piled upside-down on the tables and their aluminum legs stuck up like rows of antennae. Dreary muzak hung in the background like a stranger that preferred to remain anonymous.

Vargas felt drained from the confrontation she'd just had with her patient in 1212, Willie Jaymar, a wan young man with long, stringy hair. While making her midnight rounds, Vargas had caught Jaymar, a methadone addict, trying to punch a hole in his left wrist with the jagged-ended shaft of a Bic pen. Vargas had struggled with Jaymar to disarm him of his home-made weapon while her nurses wrestled him onto the bed. "Kill me!" he screamed, thrashing his limbs. "Kill me! Please! Kill me!" His arms and legs were quickly strapped to the bed and he was sedated. "Please . . ." Jaymar whimpered while the sedation was taking effect, "please don't make me go cold turkey again . . ."

"Mind if I rest my rear?"

Vargas looked up. "Hi, Kevin. Sure, make yourself homely."

"Thanks." Dr. Kevin Craddock, City Hospital's resident Knight psychiatrist, pulled out a chair and sat down. Suddenly he looked confused. "What did you say?" He waved at the air. "Never mind. I'm slow tonight."

Vargas grinned. "So what else is new?"

Craddock stirred a packet of Sweet 'n Low into his coffee.

"Please," he said, "not tonight. I'm not in the mood for it."

Vargas sensed her friend's melancholy. "What's the matter, Kevin?"

"Just finished counseling a patient in Station Five." Craddock blew on his coffee, took a sip, and made a pained face. He added another packet of Sweet 'n Low. "A rape victim. Five bikers kidnapped her from a bus stop and raped her repeatedly in some dark alley. But that wasn't enough for them. They slashed her to shit with a couple stilettos and left her to bleed to death. Christ, you'd cry if you saw her. I almost did. Poor woman . . . She's going to carry those scars for the rest of her life."

Craddock sipped again from his coffee, then sighed. "Why do people do such insane things?"

Vargas shrugged. "I was thinking that same question after dealing with a suicidal meth freak."

They were silent for a few moments, then Craddock said, "That rape victim—there was no reason they had to disfigure her the way they did. What made them commit such a hateful act? I read the papers and ask myself: Why is the world so brutal? It's as if there's some kind of cancer in the world that's slowly driving people insane." He nodded emphatically. "Yes, I'm sure that's what it is. A cancer. Those bikers, and those psychotics and druggies you've got up there in Station Twelve, they're cells gone bad. Negative mutations that will infect others and change them into cancer cells, who will then stain others and so on and so on until the world is filled with a new breed of monstrosity . . . and the cancerous organism dies."

Vargas shivered, thinking about his words. Sometimes she found his pessimism hard to take. "As ye sow, so shall ye reap."

"What?"

"By fostering a negative attitude, aren't you a cancer cell?"

Craddock's expression fell. Quietly he said, "I hope to God you're not right."



Vargas downed the last of her coffee and looked at her watch. "Well, I better get back. I've been gone too long." She rose and patted Craddock's shoulder. "Don't take things to heart, you're only a doctor. I'll see you later."

"I wouldn't doubt it," Craddock answered dully, staring at his cup.

Vargas walked into Station Twelve and found a paramedic seated at her desk. Nurse Judy Tompkins stood over his shoulder. The paramedic, resting his chin in one hand, seemed to be asleep.

"We were just about to page you," Tompkins said. "The paramedics brought in a John Doe."

The paramedic turned around. He held a compress over one eye and an iodine-swabbed red line cut deep into his left cheek.

"My God!" Vargas said. "What happened?"

"Your new boarder," the paramedic grumbled, handing Vargas his report. "We found him face down in the park about half an hour ago. Looked pretty beat up. No wallet or IDs. I was feeling for a pulse and suddenly he came to and attacked us. Fought like a wild animal. Then he passed out again. Figured he was one for you ladies and brought him up here."

"He woke when we placed him in a hospital bed," Tompkins added. "His behavior was extremely manic and we were forced to strap him to the bed."

"What's his condition?" Vargas asked.

"Vital signs all well above normal. Episodes of a possible drug-induced origin. Kari's just taken a blood sample down to Immunology, and if it checks out negative, we'll sedate him."

Vargas tapped her head. "What's his condition up here?"

"The dude's crazy," the paramedic said, holding the compress over his eye.

Tompkins shrugged. "All he does is growl like a dog."

"Crazy," the paramedic muttered.

"I'll take a look at him," Vargas said, putting the folder in the crook of an arm. "Call Immunology and put a stat on the blood sample. Then page Dr. Craddock and have him meet me in the John Doe's room."

The John Doe's bony arms and legs were bound to the bed with thick white straps. A purplish bruise the size of a softball

covered his left cheek, and his forehead was marked by scratches that seemed to circle his head. Purple-blue lines ringed his sunken eyes, and his pale, sallow skin gave him a dead look, the look of a professional junkie.

Not another one, Vargas groaned inwardly. She recalled Craddock's words and pictured the patient as a cancer cell. *Too bad there's no chemotherapy for reality*, she mused wryly, *this diseased piece of flesh looks ready for irradiating*.

Lena! she scolded herself, and felt ashamed for thinking of her patient so callously. *This is a human being that needs my help, and it's my job to help him. I've been working around disturbed people too long . . . Maybe I'm getting a little disturbed myself.*

A low growl filtered through the room. Vargas's thoughts fragmented and she found herself staring into the John Doe's eyes; large yellow eyes with ruptured capillaries and, in the center of each orb, a black hole empty as death itself. *Fear me*, his eyes seemed to say, and Vargas felt a shiver crawl up her spine.

She closed her eyes and shook off the chill. She breathed deeply, opened her eyes, and approached the patient's bed.

"Hello," she said cheerfully. "How are you feeling?"

The man answered with a snarl.

Vargas stood at the patient's side. "Do you know where you are now?"

The John Doe's bloodless lips curled into a grin and he growled in short bursts as if laughing. Vargas's stomach tightened and her heart began to pound. She felt her face being drawn toward his, smelled his stale-egg breath. He tilted his face up, opened his lips, and bared yellow-black teeth—

"No!" Vargas cried.

"No?"

Vargas jerked erect. Craddock stood in the doorway, puzzled yet amused. "No what?"

"Nothing." Vargas smiled weakly. She moved from the bed and watched the Doe's eyes track Craddock as he walked into the room. She took Craddock aside and handed him the Doe's folder.

Craddock skimmed the report. "This guy almost beat up three parameds? He can't weigh over a hundred thirty pounds!"

"Adrenaline, amphetamines . . . he could've been on something. He hasn't been sedated, either. We're checking a blood sample for drugs and toxins."

Craddock handed back the folder. "So what do you want me

to do with this one?"

"Something's pushed him over the edge. See if you can get him to tell us what he took or what happened to him."

"Isn't it obvious?" Craddock gestured to the patient with his chin. "Ten to one says he took some bad blotter or window pane or mesc. Just keep the animal tied up for a couple hours, he'll come down on his own."

"Kevin, cut it out!" Vargas snapped, trying to control her temper. "My God, for a psychiatrist, you're one of the most judgmental people I know. How can you tell what's wrong with that man without even examining him? He could have had some kind of organic dysfunction, maybe Parkinson's, or—"

"Okay, okay," Craddock said, waving his hands in surrender. Craddock stepped to the bed and the Doe flinched away. "Hi," the psychiatrist said, "I'm Dr. Kevin Craddock, and I'm here to help you."

The John Doe made a noise as if he were clearing his throat. Craddock turned to Vargas and rolled his eyes.

Nurse Tompkin walked into the room. "Excuse me, Lena, but I need your help in 1245."

Vargas looked hesitantly at Craddock and the patient. "Go ahead," Craddock said, "I'll call you if I need you."

Vargas laid a hand on Craddock's arm. *Be careful*, she thought, but only said, "I'll be back in a few minutes." She and Tompkins left the room.

Room 1245's occupant was Sarah Herrman, a sweet-faced teenager who had ingested too many downers. Sarah's days consisted of lying in bed in a fetal position and sucking her thumb. She also threw spontaneous fits: convinced someone was making her wear a mask, she would claw her face, trying to tear it off.

Tompkins pointed to a large mound of bedsheets in the corner of the room. In a hushed voice, she said, "I found her like that, under all those sheets. She keeps asking for you."

Vargas walked over to the mound. "Sarah," she asked gently, "what's the matter?"

"Nurse V?"

"Yes, Sarah. Is something wrong?"

"I'm afraid, Nurse V."

"Afraid? What's there to be afraid of?" Vargas patted Sarah's head through the sheet. "Come, Sarah, come on back to your bed."

There's no one here."

"But—don't you feel it, Nurse V?"

"Feel what? There's nothing here but me and Judy."

"You're wrong," she said with a crack in her voice. Her head shook back and forth beneath the sheet. "You're wrong! It's here!"

"What's here?"

Sarah pulled a portion of her covers off the top of her head. Her eyes narrowed to slits, then swelled to bursting. "*The dark!*"

A scream like shattering glass. Sarah shrieked and retreated into her white shroud. Vargas and Tompkins dashed from the room.

Nurse Kari McGuire was already running down the hall. "It came from the John Doe's room," she called over her shoulder.

The nurses sped into 1206 and found Craddock lying face down on the bed. The John Doe was gone.

Vargas probed Craddock's neck; his pulse was weak but getting stronger. Then she noticed patches of filmy jelly on the bedsheets.

Craddock stirred, rolled over on his back, and looked up at the ceiling. Vargas touched his forehead; it seemed as if his skin were soft like putty.

"Kevin," Vargas asked, "are you all right?" Craddock looked at her glassy-eyed. "Kevin, what happened here?"

"I . . . I don't know," he replied softly. His breathing began to race, and he cried, "I don't know! *I don't know!*" His muscles jerked uncontrollably; his mouth twisted into a silent scream. The spasm vanished, and Craddock's head rolled limply on its side.

"Move Dr. Craddock into 1209," Vargas instructed her nurses. "Until we find out what's going on, this room is off limits."

Vargas telephoned Dr. Ralph Burnett, chief evening administrator, and alerted him to the situation in Station Twelve. "Christ," he said dryly, "you lost a patient? How could you be so incompetent?"

Irritated, Vargas drew in a deep breath to calm herself. Of all the administrators she dealt with, Burnett was the hardest for her to get along with. She disliked his easiest-way-out style of solving problems and hated the condescending way he treated nurses.

"We did not lose a patient," Vargas explained. "He escaped. Now I wish you'd get security on this. The John Doe may be dangerous."

"Dangerous? Give me a description." Vargas described both the John Doe's physical and mental states. "I'm putting you on hold

while I call security," said Burnett. "Stay on the line."

A soft click, then Vargas felt as if she were holding a seashell to her ear. She drummed her fingers on her desk and thought of the time that was being wasted. The John Doe could be anywhere in the hospital by now—

Another click and Burnett said, "Miss Vargas, I wish you had notified me *immediately* after the incident."

"But I have!" Vargas protested.

"We'll talk about this later. Ready the Doe's report. I'm coming up to personally assess the situation."

The elevator doors opened on the twelfth floor of the psychiatric wing and Dr. Burnett stepped out. Vargas, waiting down the hall, hurried toward him. Burnett smoothed his smock, then dropped his cigarette and crushed it out with his heel. A black stain smeared the linoleum.

Burnett pointed to the folder in Vargas's hand. "Is that the Doe's report?"

Vargas handed over the folder. Burnett pushed his glasses up over his forehead and glanced through the report. The overhead lights, reflected in his lenses, made them look like huge eyes atop his head.

"Dr. Burnett," Vargas began hesitantly, "I believe something's happening up here—"

"That's an understatement."

"No, I mean that before I left Dr. Craddock with the patient, the patient's arms and legs were strapped to the bed—"

"Obviously Dr. Craddock undid the straps—God knows why." He handed the folder back to Vargas. "Let's go talk to Dr. Craddock. Maybe he'll tell us why."

Craddock lay on the bed and looked up at the ceiling. "Dr. Craddock," Burnett said unemotionally, "how are you?" Craddock continued to stare at the ceiling.

"Dr. Craddock," Burnett said more loudly, "how are you feeling?"

"Kevin?" Vargas said, then turned to Burnett. "You've got to understand, he's had quite a shock."

"I understand, Miss Vargas. Dr. Craddock—can you tell me what happened earlier between you and the John Doe?"

Craddock opened and closed his mouth as if testing his jaws.

"I . . . I don't know," he answered softly.

"You don't know? What happened after you loosened the patient's straps? Did he overpower you? Was there a struggle?"

"I . . . I didn't loosen them. He just . . . melted."

"Melted!?" Burnett blinked angrily. "People don't melt!"

"Kevin," Vargas said gently, "remember when you and I were with the John Doe? Then Nurse Tompkins called me away. What happened after I left you?"

Craddock wet his lips with his tongue. "I . . . we were talking. And I . . . I felt something from him. Like we understood each other. And I felt . . . happiness. But it wasn't happiness, it was . . . and . . . we embraced." Craddock's eyelids fluttered. "And then . . . then he—" He closed his eyes and tears streamed down his face.

Burnett tapped Vargas on the shoulder and motioned her to follow him outside. As they walked down the hall, Burnett said, "It appears that Dr. Craddock has lost his mind. Can't say I'm totally surprised, though—the fellow always seemed a little off-center. Always so cynical about everything." Burnett stopped before the elevator and pressed the down button. "When security finds your John Doe, I'll give you a call."

Vargas said, "Dr. Burnett, there's something very wrong here, and I'd like the authority to quarantine Station Twelve while I study the situation—"

"Quarantine! We're dealing with an escaped patient, Miss Vargas, not a disease."

"Dr. Burnett, I have an awful feeling—"

"You have an awful feeling," Burnett said derisively. "Well, I've got a hospital to run." The elevator opened and Burnett stepped in. "Just do as I say, Miss Vargas. *Thank you.*"

Pressure built in Vargas's skull, and her saliva became bitter to swallow. Burnett's mocking face hung before her, and she knew that if the elevator did not close soon, she would run in and strangle him.

The doors closed.

"You *bastard!*" she muttered through clenched teeth.

Vargas burst into the station and threw herself into her chair. She looked up at the clock. "Who's on the one a.m. rounds?"

Tompkins and McGuire looked at each other.

"Well?" Vargas's voice shot up an octave. "C'mon! Ready the tray!" She slapped her hands together. "Let's get moving!"

Tompkins and McGuire dashed out.

"Shit!" She grabbed the phone and dialed Immunology. A lab technician told her the blood sample was in process. She asked the technician to hurry it up, then slammed down the receiver. She hoped the John Doe carried an infectious virus that killed painfully so she could stand before Burnett and wave her finger in his face and shout *I told you so! I told you so!*—

What am I thinking? Vargas paled, nauseated by her own thoughts, and covered her face with her hands.

I can't believe how upset I am, she thought guiltily. I've always prided myself on my self-control, yet here I am sinking to Burnett's level. Maybe Kevin's right—this is a brutal world and we can't help driving each other crazy.

Vargas took off her nurse's cap and held it in her hands. *I'm not fit to wear this uniform, she thought. I'm no better than one of the patients up here. No, I'm worse. They can't help themselves for acting irrationally—their minds are damaged. But I have a healthy conscience. I should be able to distinguish right from wrong. I'm a nurse, a healer—not part of the disease.*

Tompkins entered the station and crossed to the coffeepot on the hot plate. "Kari's taking the rounds," she said without looking at Vargas.

"Judy," Lena Vargas said quietly, "I'm sorry for the way I yelled at you and Kari. I . . . I just lost my head. Please forgive me."

Tompkins waited a few moments before turning around. "That's okay," she said with a shrug. "It happens to everybody."

But do you forgive me? Vargas wondered. *There's no smile on your face, no feeling in your voice . . . Will you ever be able to forgive me? Or have I infected you, too?*

"Thanks," Vargas said.

McGuire dashed into the station. "Lena!" she exclaimed, trying to catch her breath. "Lena! Dr. Craddock is missing! His bed is empty!"

The phone rang. Vargas reached for the receiver. "Station Twelve, Nurse Vargas."

"Hey, this's Harris in Immunology. Your blood sample is one of the damndest things I've ever seen. There's nothing in this blood but white cells. Is that guy dead? I mean—"

Vargas hung up, then shuddered. It was impossible, what was happening, but . . .

She dialed Burnett's extension. "Burnett," he answered after the

first ring.

"Dr. Burnett—"

"Miss Vargas," Burnett replied in an irritated tone, "when I have news of John Doe, I'll call you."

"We have to talk!"

"Not now, I'm on my way to—"

"Dr. Burnett, *this can't wait!*"

"Well, it will! We'll talk later, Miss Vargas." Burnett's end disconnected.

"Asshole!" she spat, banging down the receiver. Her pulse thumped in her ears like drums beating a war chant.

"Stay here," she told her nurses, then strode out of the station and hurried into Craddock's room. On his bed was the outline of a human body. Vargas thought of pictures she had seen of Japanese incinerated in their places during the bombing of Hiroshima.

She peered at the outline more closely; it seemed to be made of clear glue. She touched the smear with the end of a pencil, and a milky filament clung to the pencil when she pulled it away. It had the consistency of thick saliva.

"What's happening here?" she asked herself softly. Patients disappearing . . . What was it that Craddock had said—the John Doe had *melted*? Could this be some type of virus that dissolved the body? *I knew the station should have been quarantined*, Vargas thought. *Now we may all be carriers! When I get my hands on Burnett—*

Vargas rushed back down the hall, then stopped outside the station and peered in through the glass. The lights had been turned out. "Now what?" she muttered. She walked into the station, reached for the light switches—

And whipped her fingers away.

The light switches were covered with a warm, gummy slime.

Sterling moonlight flowed through the windows and threw wavy splashes of light on the aluminum desks and cabinets. A nameless fear chilled Vargas's skin; she fought her uneasiness and stifled an urge to run away.

"Kari?" Vargas called. "Judy?"

Silence.

A scratch of something against metal. Sensing a presence behind her, Vargas slowly turned. A human form stood in the shadows. It stepped forward, moonlight dusting its face.

"Kevin!"

"Lena," Craddock answered dully. She took a step forward. "Stop!" he cried.

Vargas froze.

"Don't touch me," Craddock said. "You were my friend once —"

"And I'm still your friend."

"Then listen to me!" Craddock said urgently. "I beg you, while I still have a shred of humanity, do as I say! Get out of here and warn the others!"

"Kevin, what are you talking about?" Was Burnett right, had Craddock lost his mind? "Kevin, let me help you back to your bed. I'll get Kari —"

"No!" he thundered. His scowl became a crooked smile, and he pointed a finger at her. "I have Kari," he said in a fuzzy voice, "and now I will have you. Give yourself over. Join me, Lena." He reached out to Vargas and beckoned her to accept his embrace. "Join the others."

Craddock's form shimmered in the moonlight and began to strobe: Tompkins—McGuire—the John Doe—unknown identities flashing one after another . . . and suddenly it took its true shape, a black, furry beast with blood-red eyes. It smiled cruelly. Long, sharp fangs dripped saliva.

Vargas screamed. Her senses unfocused; the room tilted violently and she dropped to the floor. *Got to get out of here*, she thought while woozily trying to get up.

"Don't be afraid," Craddock said gently. His body sagged, then flowed downward into a yellow-white puddle. Pseudopodia snaked out and surrounded Vargas as if she was a germ being attacked and engulfed by a white blood cell.

"My God . . ." she said.

Something warm and thick caressed her leg, and Vargas's eyes burrowed deep within her skull. Bright reds and yellows shot across the dark sky of her mind and exploded in blinding novas. Wet chills tore through her soul. She felt herself fighting to stay afloat in a churning black sea. Her arms grabbed wildly for something to hold onto, but all she saw were bodies of children that had starved to death. Black waves crashed over her; she swallowed mouthfuls of blood. And with the blood she tasted the blackness within her, the hate that smelled of scalded flesh. The hate she had for the job, the people she worked with, the loathing she had for herself . . . And as she gulped down the tepid sludge it grew sweeter, more intoxicating, and she fought no more, but freely drank of it.

I like this, Vargas thought. I can live with this. I always have. Nothing to be afraid of. Nothing to be afraid of at all . . .

The thing flowed over her, dissolved her, and became her. After a few moments, the lumpy yellow-pink stew smoothed once more and formed itself into Nurse Lena Vargas.

She knew that something was different within her, but she wasn't sure what. Slowly an awareness grew in her; she remembered how much she despised Burnett. But it was a hate tinged with love, for Burnett was filled with darkness, and absorbing him would be a satisfying meal.

She picked up the phone and dialed Burnett's extension. It rang unanswered, and she decided to wait for him in his office. As she walked down the hall to the elevator, she remembered something she had heard once, that the world was a brutal place.

The thought made her smile—and salivate.

Bugs

by LARRY TRITTEN

The world might have regarded Bentwall as a fiend, but he knew he was just having fun.

Following an argument with his wife over who would feed their prisoner, Bentwall, as an alternative to homicide, took up a can of Raid (his eye lured by the cartoonish logo of a postmortem bug, its multiple pair of legs folded as if in prayer, antennae wilted, mouth gloomily down-curved) and descended from the third floor back porch to the small yard behind their flat. There were three bricks in the moribund yellowish grass on the ground there, and Bentwall had been meaning to rehash a childhood delight: turning over stones in his aunt's garden and marveling at the microcosm thereby revealed, a world of various small creatures which, their habitat unlidded, scurried about in errant dismay. Initially, Bentwall had been satisfied by the voyeuristic and omnipotent aspects of the experience, but in time a malign impulse drove him to extend the latter feeling to insecticide. At first it was a sufficient pleasure to smash the small creatures with the stone that had served as their shelter, reflecting in the aftermath on the colorful pulped and mangled states of their remains, but in time he began to torture the creatures, the better to enjoy the protracted agonies of their slow dying. Flame and blades were favored tools, the slow application of heat or gradual dismemberment of thorax, head, and abdomen optimum techniques. The average child passes through such a phase of unmitigated monsterism, yet with Bentwall it had jelled and become a vocation. Bentwall had the curiosity of a scientist, yet the heart, mind, and spirit of a fiend.

In the backyard, Bentwall knelt before the bricks, enjoying the kind of delicious suspense that precedes the opening of a birthday or Christmas package. As a gunner will fire test bursts en route to

combat, he spritzed a premonitory jet of Raid onto a forefinger and licked it off. His tongue shuddered, but not entirely without pleasure, for Bentwall was certifiably psychotic. He thought that the Raid might make a suitable garnish for the chicken he intended to serve the prisoner later in the day. Then he remembered that Tiki had selfishly insisted on doing the day's feeding (although she had done it yesterday, too!), and his mood grew dense with anger.

Bentwall shook the can of Raid vigorously with one hand while placing the other on one of the bricks. He deftly upended the brick, thrusting the can forward with a fencer's readiness, but there was no movement in the rectangular depression save the subliminal crackling of a few twiggy bits of bosk in the wake of the released pressure.

Bentwall sneered, his anger building. He quickly turned over another brick. Nothing. His eyes narrowed, and for a moment he knelt in a frozen pose, transfixed by a terrific and uncontained anger that came over him whenever his desires were thwarted or remained unfulfilled. Though no insects were there, he sprayed the overturned brick's shallow bed thoroughly, hoping to see a roused straggler come running into view like those flame-clad Japanese who burst out of torched pillboxes in the newsreels he had watched before Heckle and Jeckle as a boy.

But there were no small creatures for him to agonize, and Bentwall felt his anger deepen as its red machineries began to throb. He hefted the brick in one hand, squatting back on his heels, and then, suddenly spying a prostrate sniper partially concealed under a thatch of rust-colored pine needles, he pivoted sideways and began to hammer the soldier repeatedly with the brick until the tip of its rifle broke off and its shoulders were caved in. Whether it was Japanese, Nazi, Commie, or American didn't matter to Bentwall, an ex-Marine who had been dishonorably discharged for showing more bloodlust than is officially prudent.

There remained a third brick for Bentwall to turn over, but he had lost his enthusiasm now, since the odds were clearly against him. Still, he contemplated the brick as a predator will linger reflectively over potential prey.

"Jimmy!" Tiki's voice sung out from the porch overhead. "What you doin', dungus!? What you doin' down there?"

Bentwall turned to squint up at her figure. She was naked from the waist down, her corpulent thighs muraled with the homemade tattoos he had wrought—snakes, hearts, skulls, and the spider she'd

asked for in the high sodden juncture where the apex of a thigh intersected with a labial flange. The basketball-size spheres of her breasts slumped low in the hammock of her bikini top.

"Killin' bugs," he said, and grinned up at her.

Tiki snorted. She shook her head, as a mother will musingly disparage a child's activities. "I'm goin' to the store for some croissants," she said. "Don't you feed the prisoner, mind!"

"Yeah," Bentwall said, and she was gone.

He listened carefully, squatting there in the backyard, and when he heard, faintly, the distant slamming of the front door, he reached out and turned over the last brick. There was nothing under it except dead grass and a Pepsi-Cola bottle cap. Bentwall's vision glazed momentarily as his anger surged; it tided back then, but remained at a slow simmer. He fumed. Was he to have no fun at all?

Bentwall put down the can of Raid and picked up the bottle cap. Above the large blue-lettered Pepsi label there were three lines of smaller print, presumably a listing of ingredients, but as he squinted at the lines Bentwall could have sworn that the first one read FEED THE PRISONER. He stood up, smiling. An orange-striped cat on the backyard fence stared at him harshly, remembering him as a source of aggravation. "Shoo!" Bentwall said, grabbing up the can of Raid and feinting with it, and the cat vanished in a scampering.

Bentwall climbed the stairs with a mounting sense of purpose. In the kitchen he opened the oven and took out the chicken, which was cooked to a russet umber color and gave off a delicious baked fragrance. He worried off one of the legs and put it on a plate, then carried the morsel to the guest room.

Inside, the prisoner, wrists and ankles trussed with masking tape, cringed in a huddled bundle against the wall. He watched Bentwall with the sharp gaze of a hawk, yet with no expression whatever, as Bentwall put the plate on the floor where, by dint of acrobatic exertion, the prisoner might feed, fishlike, without the assistance of his hands.

"Chicken," Bentwall said.

The prisoner's face was a rigid mask of detachment, yet Bentwall thought that deep within the well of his gaze glinted a tiny light of hatred.

"Eat," Bentwall said. He reached out and with remarkable gentleness touched the prisoner's head, smoothing the sweat-matted hair in a slight caress. "Got to be strong," he said, "for later."

The prisoner closed his eyes and thinly whispered through the tape. "G'way."

Bentwall frowned. "I'll smack you," he warned, pushing the plate closer.

"G'way."

The sound of the telephone ringing in the hallway interrupted the dialogue. Ripping off the tape covering the prisoner's mouth, Bentwall turned away, hurried to answer it.

"Jimmy, Doc," the voice at the other end of the line said.

"Doc, hi," Bentwall said.

"You got one?"

"Yep."

"Male or female?"

"Guy." Jimmy grinned.

"Wino or nocturnal pedestrian?"

"P'destrin," Bentwall said. "Tiki got 'im." He remembered how efficiently she had done it, too—how she had lifted her frothy skirt like the upper jaw of an elegant trap, and while the guy had rushed forward to rummage amid the pink mist, Bentwall had darted in and seized him with a great trawler's net, belaboring him with a hammer.

"Wonderful," Doc said. "Jimmy?"

"Yeah."

"No marks. That's our department."

"Sure," Bentwall nodded.

"My regards to Tiki."

Jimmy hung up the phone and went into the front room. He had wanted badly to slap the prisoner, but with Doc's edict fresh in his mind he instead sat on his hand. With his free hand, he turned on the television set with the remote button and settled back, his anger dwindling to a slight psychic effervescence in his mind as the tv screen formulated a picture of a man tumbling in slow motion down a long stairway while an animated candy bar crawled across the bottom of the picture, one hand thrown up as if to fend off the clamor. The Bad News was just beginning.

W.S.

by L. P. HARTLEY

He was the psychopath that every writer fears. And he was getting closer.

The first postcard came from Forfar. "I thought you might like a picture of Forfar," it said. "You have always been so interested in Scotland, and that is one reason why I am interested in you. I have enjoyed all your books, but do you really get to grips with people? I doubt it. Try to think of this as a handshake from your devoted admirer, W.S."

Like other novelists, Walter Streeter was used to getting communications from strangers. Usually they were friendly but sometimes they were critical. In either case he always answered them, for he was conscientious. But answering them took up the time and energy he needed for his writing, so that he was rather relieved that W.S. had given no address. The photograph of Forfar was uninteresting and he tore it up. His anonymous correspondent's criticism, however, lingered in his mind. Did he really fail to come to grips with his characters? Perhaps he did. He was aware that in most cases they were either projections of his own personality or, in different forms, the antithesis of it. The Me and the Not Me. Perhaps W.S. had spotted this. Not for the first time Walter made a vow to be more objective.

About ten days later arrived another postcard, this time from Berwick-on-Tweed. "What do you think of Berwick-on-Tweed?" it said. "Like you, it's on the Border. I hope this doesn't sound rude. I don't mean that you are a borderline case! You know how much I admire your stories. Some people call them other-worldly. I think you should plump for one world or the other. Another firm handshake from W.S."

Walter Streeter pondered over this and began to wonder about

the sender. Was his correspondent a man or a woman? It looked like a man's handwriting—commercial, unselfconscious—and the criticism was like a man's. On the other hand, it was like a woman to probe—to want to make him feel at the same time flattered and unsure of himself. He felt the faint stirrings of curiosity but soon dismissed them; he was not a man to experiment with acquaintances. Still it was odd to think of this unknown person speculating about him, sizing him up. Other-worldly, indeed! He reread the last two chapters he had written. Perhaps they didn't have their feet firm on the ground. Perhaps he was too ready to escape, as other novelists were nowadays, into an ambiguous world, a world where the conscious mind did not have things too much its own way. But did that matter? He threw the picture of Berwick-on-Tweed into his November fire and tried to write; but the words came haltingly, as though contending with an extra-strong barrier of self-criticism. And as the days passed he became uncomfortably aware of self-division, as though someone had taken hold of his personality and was pulling it apart. His work was no longer homogeneous, there were two strains in it, unreconciled and opposing, and it went much slower as he tried to resolve the discord. Never mind, he thought: perhaps I was getting into a groove. These difficulties may be growing pains, I may have tapped a new source of supply. If only I could correlate the two and make their conflict fruitful, as many artists have!

The third postcard showed a picture of York Minster. "I know you are interested in cathedrals," it said. "I'm sure this isn't a sign of megalomania in your case, but smaller churches are sometimes more rewarding. I'm seeing a good many churches on my way south. Are you busy writing or are you looking round for ideas? Another hearty handshake from your friend W.S."

It was true that Walter Streeter was interested in cathedrals. Lincoln Cathedral had been the subject of one of his youthful fantasies and he had written about it in a travel book. And it was also true that he admired mere size and was inclined to undervalue parish churches. But how could W.S. have known that? And was it really a sign of megalomania? And who was W.S. anyhow?

For the first time it struck him that the initials were his own. No, not for the first time. He had noticed it before, but they were such commonplace initials; they were Gilbert's, they were Maugham's, they were Shakespeare's—a common possession. Anyone might have them. Yet now it seemed to him an odd coincidence; and the idea came into his mind—suppose I have been writing postcards to myself?

People did such things, especially people with split personalities. Not that he was one, of course. And yet there were these unexplained developments—the cleavage in his writing, which had now extended from his thought to his style, making one paragraph languorous with semicolons and subordinate clauses, and another sharp and incisive with main verbs and full-stops.

He looked at the handwriting again. It had seemed the perfection of ordinariness—anybody's hand—so ordinary as perhaps to be disguised. Now he fancied he saw in it resemblances to his own. He was just going to pitch the postcard in the fire when suddenly he decided not to. I'll show it to somebody, he thought.

His friend said, "My dear fellow, it's all quite plain. The woman's a lunatic. I'm sure it's a woman. She has probably fallen in love with you and wants to make you interested in her. I should pay no attention whatsoever. People whose names are mentioned in the papers are always getting letters from lunatics. If they worry you, destroy them without reading them. That sort of person is often a little psychic, and if she senses that she's getting a rise out of you she'll go on."

For a moment Walter Streeter felt reassured. A woman, a little mouselike creature, who had somehow taken a fancy to him! What was there to feel uneasy about in that? It was really rather sweet and touching, and he began to think of her and wonder what she looked like. What did it matter if she was a little mad? Then his subconscious mind, searching for something to torment him with, and assuming the authority of logic, said: Supposing those postcards are a lunatic's and you are writing them to yourself, doesn't it follow that you must be a lunatic too?

He tried to put the thought away from him; he tried to destroy the postcard as he had the others. But something in him wanted to preserve it. It had become a piece of him, he felt. Yielding to an irresistible compulsion, which he dreaded, he found himself putting it behind the clock on the chimneypiece. He couldn't see it but he knew that it was there.

He now had to admit to himself that the postcard business had become a leading factor in his life. It had created a new area of thoughts and feelings and they were most unhelpful. His being was strung up in expectation of the next postcard.

Yet when it came it took him, as the others had, completely by surprise. He could not bring himself to look at the picture. "I hope you are well and would like a postcard from Coventry," he read.

"Have you ever been sent to Coventry? I have—in fact you sent me there. It isn't a pleasant experience, I can tell you. I am getting nearer. Perhaps we shall come to grips after all. I advised you to come to grips with your characters, didn't I? Have I given you any new ideas? If I have you ought to thank me, for they are what novelists want, I understand. I have been rereading your novels, living in them, I might say. Another hard handshake. As always, W.S."

A wave of panic surged up in Walter Streeter. How was it that he had never noticed, all this time, the most significant fact about the postcards—that each one came from a place geographically closer to him than the last? "I am coming nearer." Had his mind, unconsciously self-protective, worn blinkers? If it had, he wished he could put them back. He took an atlas and idly traced out W.S.'s itinerary. An interval of eighty miles or so seemed to separate the stopping places. Walter lived in a large West Country town about ninety miles from Coventry.

Should he show the postcards to an alienist? But what could an alienist tell him? He would not know what Walter wanted to know, whether he had anything to fear from W.S.

Better go to the police. The police were used to dealing with poison-pens. If they laughed at him, so much the better.

They did not laugh, however. They said they thought the postcards were a hoax and that W.S. would never show up in the flesh. Then they asked if there was anyone who had a grudge against him. "No one that I know of," Walter said. They, too, took the view that the writer was probably a woman. They told him not to worry but to let them know if further postcards came.

A little comforted, Walter went home. The talk with the police had done him good. He thought it over. It was quite true what he had told them—that he had no enemies. He was not a man of strong personal feelings; such feelings as he had went into his books. In his books he had drawn some pretty nasty characters. Not of recent years, however. Of recent years he had felt a reluctance to draw a very bad man or woman: he thought it morally irresponsible and artistically unconvincing, too. There was good in everyone: lags were a myth. Latterly—but he had to admit that it was several weeks since he laid pen to paper, so much had this ridiculous business of the postcards weighed upon his mind—if he had to draw a really wicked person he represented him as a Communist or a Nazi—someone who had deliberately put off his human characteristics.

But in the past, when he was younger and more inclined to see things as black or white, he had let himself go once or twice. He did not remember his old books very well but there was a character in one, *The Outcast*, into whom he had really got his knife. He had written about him with extreme vindictiveness, just as if he was a real person whom he was trying to show up. He had experienced a curious pleasure in attributing every kind of wickedness to this man. He never gave him the benefit of the doubt. He had never felt a twinge of pity for him, even when he paid the penalty for his misdeeds on the gallows. He had so worked himself up that the idea of this dark creature, creeping about brimful of malevolence, had almost frightened him.

Odd that he couldn't remember the man's name.

He took the book down from the shelf and turned the pages—even now they affected him uncomfortably. Yes, here it was, William . . . William . . . he would have to look back to find the surname. William Stainsforth.

His own initials.

Walter did not think the coincidence meant anything but it colored his mind and weakened its resistance to his obsession. So uneasy was he that when the next postcard came it came as a relief.

"I am quite close now," he read, and involuntarily he turned the postcard over. The glorious central tower of Gloucester Cathedral met his eye. He stared at it as if it could tell him something, then with an effort went on reading. "My movements, as you may have guessed, are not quite under my control, but all being well I look forward to seeing you sometime this weekend. Then we can really come to grips. I wonder if you'll recognize me! It won't be the first time you have given me hospitality. My hand feels a bit cold tonight, but my handshake will be just as hearty. As always, W.S.

"P. S. Does Gloucester remind you of anything? Gloucester gaol?"

Walter took the postcard straight to the police station, and asked if he could have police protection over the weekend. The officer in charge smiled at him and said he was quite sure it was a hoax; but he would tell someone to keep an eye on the premises.

"You still have no idea who it could be?" he asked.

Walter shook his head.

It was Tuesday; Walter Streeter had plenty of time to think about the weekend. At first he felt he would not be able to live through the interval, but strange to say his confidence increased instead of

waning. He set himself to work as though he *could* work, and presently he found he could—differently from before, and, he thought, better. It was as though the nervous strain he had been living under had, like an acid, dissolved a layer of non-conductive thought that came between him and his subject: he was nearer to it now, and his characters, instead of obeying woodenly his stage directions, responded wholeheartedly and with all their beings to the tests he put them to. So passed the days, and the dawn of Friday seemed like any other day until something jerked him out of his self-induced trance and suddenly he asked himself, "When does a weekend begin?"

A long weekend begins on Friday. At that his panic returned. He went to the street door and looked out. It was a suburban, unfrequented street of detached Regency houses like his own. They had tall square gateposts, some crowned with semi-circular iron brackets holding lanterns. Most of these were out of repair: only two or three were ever lit. A car went slowly down the street; some people crossed it: everything was normal.

Several times that day he went to look and saw nothing unusual, and when Saturday came, bringing no postcard, his panic had almost subsided. He nearly rang up the police station to tell them not to bother to send anyone after all.

They were as good as their word: they did send someone. Between tea and dinner, the time when weekend guests most commonly arrive, Walter went to the door and there, between two unlit gateposts, he saw a policeman standing—the first policeman he had ever seen in Charlotte Street. At the sight, and at the relief it brought him, he realized how anxious he had been. Now he felt safer than he had ever felt in his life, and also a little ashamed at having given extra trouble to a hard-worked body of men. Should he go and speak to his unknown guardian, offer him a cup of tea or a drink? It would be nice to hear him laugh at Walter's fancies. But no—somehow he felt his security the greater when its source was impersonal and anonymous. "P. C. Smith" was somehow less impressive than "police protection."

Several times from an upper window (he didn't like to open the door and stare) he made sure that his guardian was still there; and once, for added proof, he asked his housekeeper to verify the strange phenomenon. Disappointingly, she came back saying she had seen no policeman; but she was not very good at seeing things, and when Walter went a few minutes later he saw him plain enough. The man must walk about, of course; perhaps he had been taking a stroll

when Mrs. Kendal looked.

It was contrary to his routine to work after dinner but tonight he did, he felt so much in the vein. Indeed, a sort of exaltation possessed him; the words ran off his pen; it would be foolish to check the creative impulse for the sake of a little extra sleep. On, on. They were right who said the small hours were the time to work. When his house-keeper came in to say goodnight he scarcely raised his eyes.

In the warm, snug little room the silence purred around him like a kettle. He did not even hear the doorbell till it had been ringing for some time.

A visitor at this hour?

His knees trembling, he went to the door, scarcely knowing what he expected to find; so what was his relief on opening it, to see the doorway filled by the tall figure of a policeman. Without waiting for the man to speak—

"Come in, come in, my dear fellow," he exclaimed. He held his hand out, but the policeman did not take it. "You must have been very cold standing out there. I didn't know that it was snowing, though," he added, seeing the snowflakes on the policeman's cape and helmet. "Come in and warm yourself."

"Thanks," said the policeman. "I don't mind if I do."

Walter knew enough of the phrases used by men of the policeman's stamp not to take this for a grudging acceptance. "This way," he prattled on. "I was writing in my study. By Jove, it *is* cold, I'll turn the gas on more. Now won't you take your traps off, and make yourself at home?"

"I can't stay long," the policeman said. "I've got a job to do, as you know."

"Oh yes," said Walter, "such a silly job, a sinecure." He stopped, wondering if the policeman would know what a sinecure was. "I suppose you know what it's about—the postcards?"

The policeman nodded.

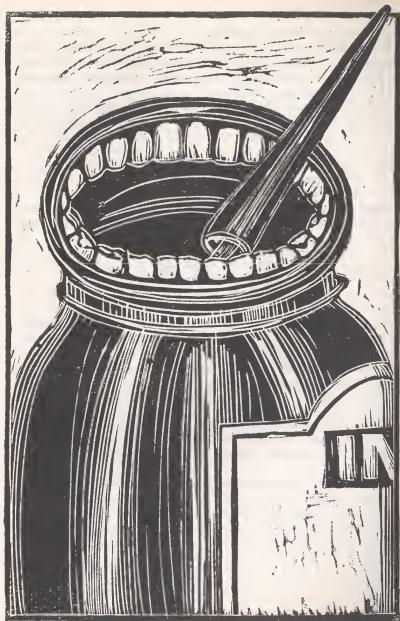
"But nothing can happen to me as long as you are here," said Walter. "I shall be as safe . . . as safe as houses. Stay as long as you can, and have a drink."

"I never drink on duty," said the policeman. Still in his cape and helmet, he looked round. "So this is where you work," he said.

"Yes, I was writing when you rang."

"Some poor devil's for it, I expect," the policeman said.

"Oh, why?" Walter was hurt by his unfriendly tone, and noticed



how hard his gooseberry eyes were.

"I'll tell you in a minute," said the policeman, and then the telephone bell rang. Walter excused himself and hurried from the room.

"This is the police station," said a voice. "Is that Mr. Streeter?" Walter said it was.

"Well, Mr. Streeter, how is everything at your place? All right, I hope? I'll tell you why I ask. I'm sorry to say we quite forgot about that little job we were going to do for you. Bad coordination, I'm afraid."

"But," said Walter, "you did send someone."

"No, Mr. Streeter, I'm afraid we didn't."

"But there's a policeman here, here in this very house."

There was a pause, then his interlocuter said, in a less casual voice: "He can't be one of our chaps. Did you see his number by any chance?"

"No."

A longer pause and then the voice said:

"Would you like us to send somebody now?"

"Yes, p . . . please."

"All right then, we'll be with you in a jiffy."

Walter put back the receiver. What now? he asked himself. Should he barricade the door? Should he run out into the street? Should he try to rouse his housekeeper? A policeman of any sort was a formidable proposition, but a rogue policeman! How long would it take the real police to come? A jiffy, they had said. What was a jiffy in terms of minutes? While he was debating the door opened and his guest came in.

"No room's private when the street door's once passed," he said. "Had you forgotten I was a policeman?"

"Was?" said Walter, edging away from him. "You *are* a policeman."

"I have been other things as well," the policeman said. "Thief, pimp, blackmailer, not to mention murderer. *You* should know."

The policeman, if such he was, seemed to be moving toward him and Walter suddenly became alive to the importance of small distances—the distance from the sideboard to the table, the distance from one chair to another.

"I don't know what you mean," he said. "Why do you speak like that? I've never done you any harm. I've never set eyes on you before."

"Oh, haven't you?" the man said. "But you've thought about me

and"—his voice rose—"and you've written about me. You got some fun out of me, didn't you? Now I'm going to get some fun out of you. You made me just as nasty as you could. Wasn't that doing me harm? You didn't think what it would feel like to be me, did you? You didn't put yourself in my place, did you? You hadn't any pity for me, had you? Well, I'm not going to have any pity for you."

"But I tell you," cried Walter, clutching the table's edge, "I don't know you!"

"And now you say you don't know me! You did all that to me and then forgot me!" His voice became a whine, charged with self-pity. "You forgot William Stainsforth."

"William Stainsforth!"

"Yes. I was your scapegoat, wasn't I? You unloaded all your self-dislike on me. You felt pretty good while you were writing about me. You thought, what a noble, upright fellow you were, writing about this rotter. Now, as one W.S. to another, what shall I do, if I behave in character?"

"I . . . I don't know," muttered Walter.

"You don't know?" Stainsforth sneered. "You ought to know, you fathered me. What would William Stainsforth do if he met his old dad in a quiet place, his kind old dad who made him swing?"

Walter could only stare at him.

"You know what he'd do as well as I," said Stainsforth. Then his face changed and he said abruptly, "No, you don't, because you never really understood me. I'm not so black as you painted me." He paused, and a flicker of hope started in Walter's breast. "You never gave me a chance, did you? Well, I'm going to give you one. That shows you never understood me, doesn't it?"

Walter nodded.

"And there's another thing you have forgotten."

"What is that?"

"I was a kid once," the ex-policeman said.

Walter said nothing.

"You admit that?" said William Stainsforth grimly. "Well, if you can tell me of one virtue you ever credited me with—just one kind thought—just one redeeming feature—"

"Yes?" said Walter, trembling.

"Well, then I'll let you off."

"And if I can't?" whispered Walter.

"Well, then, that's just too bad. We'll have to come to grips and you know what that means. You took off one of my arms but I've

still got the other. 'Stainsforth of the iron hand' you called me."

Walter began to pant.

"I'll give you two minutes to remember," Stainsforth said. They both looked at the clock. At first the stealthy movement of the hand paralyzed Walter's thought. He stared at William Stainsforth's face, his cruel, crafty face, which seemed to be always in shadow, as if it was something the light could not touch. Desperately he searched his memory for the one fact that would save him; but his memory, clenched like a fist, would give up nothing. "I must invent something," he thought, and suddenly his mind relaxed and he saw, printed on it like a photograph, the last page of the book. Then, with the speed and magic of a dream, each page appeared before him in perfect clarity until the first was reached, and he realized with overwhelming force that what he looked for was not there. In all that evil there was not one hint of good. And he felt, compulsively and with a kind of exaltation, that unless he testified to this the cause of goodness everywhere would be betrayed.

"There's nothing to be said for you!" he shouted. "And you know it! Of all your dirty tricks this is the dirtiest! You want me to whitewash you, do you? The very snowflakes on you are turning black! How dare you ask me for a character? I've given you one already! God forbid that I should ever say a good word for you! I'd rather die!"

Stainsforth's one arm shot out. "Then die!" he said.

The police found Walter Streeter slumped across the dining table. His body was still warm, but he was dead. It was easy to tell how he died; for it was not his hand that his visitor had shaken, but his throat. Walter Streeter had been strangled. Of his assailant there was no trace. On the table and on his clothes were flakes of melting snow. But how it came there remained a mystery, for no snow was reported from any district on the day he died.

The New Man

by BARBARA OWENS

... in which madness takes the form of a smiling, freckle-faced twelve-year-old boy.

I didn't notice him when I got off the bus. Johnson and I were deep into a rehash of the latest screwing by Washington's merry men. Divided by politics, we were passionately united in our contempt for politicians. Light snow had turned to stinging flurries during the long ride from downtown, and in the minute we stopped under the streetlight to turn up coat collars, a clear voice floated from the shadow figures around us at the bus stop.

"Excuse me? Have you seen my dad? Alan Coombs? A tall man with reddish hair—wears a brown and white checked coat? Excuse me, please, have you seen Alan Coombs?"

Finally, it registered. My discourse trailed off as Johnson turned back with a grin.

"Someone looking for you, Alan. Hey, I gotta run. See you tomorrow, man."

His square back melted into the dark; I was left alone with the owner of the voice. A slight boy, maybe twelve, narrow freckled face, snowflakes dusting his sandy hair. He wore only sneakers, t-shirt, and faded jeans—his whole body looked pinched with cold. Snow hissed and spat through the space between us; I turtled my head into my collar.

"Did you want me?"

He grinned. "Hi, Dad. I came to meet you. Surprised?" When I didn't answer he came close, peering up at me in the yellow light. "Dad? Something wrong?"

Without realizing it I backed away, one slow step. "Hey, I

think you've got me mixed up with someone else. I'm not your father."

At the time it struck me almost funny. How could a kid not recognize his own father? Snow started needling its icy way down my neck.

"You'd better hike on home. You'll freeze out here in those clothes."

I started to turn, but his hand was on my arm. A small hand, reddened and rough from cold. He looked puzzled.

"Dad? It's me, Jerry. Jerry, your son, remember?"

Even through my coat his touch was repugnant. I jerked my arm away. The bus stop crowd had dissipated, vanished into the night; we were alone in the yellow pool of light.

"Hey," I said, trying to be patient, "it's late and I'm cold. You've made a mistake. Go home—your dad's probably waiting there for you."

I plunged into the two dark blocks to home and knew before a hundred steps he was there, behind me. Suddenly, the cold was deeper. In the illumination of the next streetlight I looked back. He was a small thin shadow, maybe thirty feet behind.

"Look," I said, and was surprised to hear my voice tremble, "I don't know what game you're playing, but I'm in no mood to be a part of it. Go on—go home."

He stopped, shuffled on the sidewalk. I couldn't see his face.

"Why're you mad at me, Dad? I just wanted to walk home with you."

By the time I reached the gate I was trotting. The porch light cast a warm welcome glow. Once again, at the door, I looked back. He huddled at the gate, shoulders bent under his thin shirt, face a featureless blur.

"If you're not gone in five minutes I'm going to call the police, you hear me?"

His voice was small. "Can't I come inside? Dad?"

Sharon looked up from setting the table when the bolt shot home behind me, loud and final.

"Oh, Alan. Hi. Dinner'll be ready in a minute. Better get out of those wet shoes."

I wanted to look outside, see if he was there. But then I'd have to open the door. The longer I stood there, the sillier I felt, and Sharon paused on her way to the kitchen.

"Alan? You okay?"

Familiar words, too familiar, and I forced myself into the room. My room—my home—my wife—my—

"Where's Pete?"

—my real son.

"In his room—glommed to the stereo, as usual." She turned toward the kitchen. "Give him a yell. Dinner'll be on the table by the time he gets here."

For some reason I seemed to move very slowly down the hall. Why did I feel afraid? So some nutty kid followed me home—called me Dad. Trivial—a mistake. What was there to be afraid of? Those days were over. I was a new man now, a New Man, in control.

Pete looked up when I opened the door. "Hey, Dad." He sprawled across the bed, fifteen, and already taller than me. Before I opened my mouth he said, "I know, I know. I'll turn it down."

I loved this boy, the only one nature had seen fit to give me, but we were each at stages in our lives when we couldn't show it, so I said, "Deaf before you're twenty, moron. Mom says come to dinner."

He ambled down the hall behind me and I felt myself relax. Normal, everything was normal. Why had I let a small thing spook me like that? Then Sharon's accusing eyes met mine and I didn't even feel Pete bump my shoulder. I froze, the cold outside inside now, turning me to living stone.

"What kind of joke did you think that was, Alan? Locking him outside like that. He had to ring the bell."

The bell. I hadn't heard it over Pete's stereo. The boy stood in my living room, shivering, as Sharon briskly towed his hair.

"Honestly, sometimes I wonder about your sense of humor. Look at him—he's freezing. What made you do such a cruel thing, Alan?"

The boy looked up at me. I couldn't move. This was my house—my wife—my—

Pete shoved past me. "Hey, jerk, what were you doing out without a coat on? You could cart your brain around in a very small package, you know that?"

As he passed the boy, he feinted at his head; the boy ducked and grinned. Pete flung himself into his chair.

"Hey, is dinner ready or not? Let's eat."

Like a sleepwalker, I moved toward my wife and the boy. She shielded him from my approach as though I posed some kind of threat.

"You know this kid?"

"Funny. I'm going to get him some dry clothes. You two go on and start."

For the first time I saw it—the table set for four. I gripped the back of my chair and said to Pete, my only son, "Who is that boy? What the hell is going on?"

Pete's eyes flicked over me, all attention on his plate. "Come on, Dad, quit kidding. Sit down."

"I'm serious. Who is he?"

My voice was too loud: Pete's head came up warily, the old look in his eyes, the fear and dread I remembered from past years. Before he could say anything, Sharon and the boy were back. She steered him to the empty chair. He wore a clean shirt and pants, clothes I never saw Pete wear.

"Sit down, Alan. Everything's getting cold." Her voice was tight.

"Just a minute—" I began.

"Just a minute yourself. It's not like you to play mean tricks. Fun's fun, but that wasn't funny. I think you should apologize."

Was everyone crazy? The boy was smiling at me. Pete's eyes remained fixed on his plate. I faced Sharon's anger with a little of my own.

"Will somebody tell me what's going on here? I don't mean to be rude before a guest, but just who the hell is this kid? He jumps me at the bus stop, says he's my son, follows me all . . . Now you two act—can I be let in on the joke? Sure, he's welcome for dinner, but who is he, and why's everyone acting as if he belonged here?"

I'd heard of silences that rang, but had never actually experienced one. Pete shot a look at his mother and away, avoiding me. The boy's gaze remained on me. So did Sharon's. There was that look on her face, the mixture of fear and dread I'd seen on Pete's just moments before.

"Are you still trying to be funny?"

"No! Can't anyone answer a simple question?" I was getting loud again; I heard it, and struggled for control.

Finally, Sharon answered—in a slow patient voice.

"It's Jerry, Alan. Do you mean to say you don't know your own son?"

I heard the clock tick far away in the kitchen. I heard a car go by outside, tires crunching through new snow, and deep inside I heard a faint crack begin in my dam of self-control. I pushed my



fist against it, through my chest, and I stayed calm.

"I don't have a son named Jerry. I know it, and you all know it, too. What are you trying to do? I never saw that boy before tonight."

I watched their faces turn away. Only the boy watched me as my wife and real son talked, talked before me as in the old days, as though I didn't exist. Sometimes I hadn't then, not really, but now was different. A new man, today I was a New Man.

"What did he say to you, Pete?"

"Just wanted to know who Jerry was. It's not starting again, is it?"

"Oh, God, I thought . . . Jerry, what was he like at the bus stop? Was he okay when he got off?"

For the first time the clear voice of the boy. "Yeah. He was with another man, talking. Then, when he started acting funny—like he didn't know me—I thought, you know . . ."

He darted a glance at me. I folded my hands on the table and said, "Thought what—Jerry, is that your name? What did you think when I denied being your father?"

His voice dropped almost to a whisper. "I thought you'd been drinking."

My hands leaped to clench, but I stopped them. To me, my voice sounded reasonable, calm.

"I have not been drinking. I haven't had a drink in over a year. I crawled through hell to get here, but I don't drink anymore."

Jerry ducked his head. "I'm sorry, Dad."

I even managed a smile. "Don't ever call me that again. I don't know who you are or what insanity's in this house, but I *do* know I'm not your dad."

I probably would have continued, but Sharon stopped me. She rose suddenly, pulling Jerry protectively to her.

"I think Jerry's had enough for one day. He's going to bed. No, that's enough, Alan."

She hurried him from the room, and immediately Pete lunged to his feet.

"Goin' to my room," he muttered.

"Pete."

"Later, Dad. Not now." He didn't look at me.

The house was quiet. I stared at the extra plate on the dining room table and fought a black urge to run out into the snow—get away. No, that was over. I didn't run from things anymore—I

coped. Somehow I'd work this out.

Sharon's return steps were reluctant. More than a trace of her old expression hovered in her eyes. She sat down across from me and folded her hands.

"You want to smell my breath, Sharon?"

"Alan—"

"That boy is not my son."

She leaned toward me. "How can you say that? What's wrong with you? My God, he looks exactly like you! Do you know how you're making him—all of us—feel? Why are you doing this? God, haven't we been through enough?"

"Who is he?"

Her eyes misted; she knew I hated to see her cry. "What's he done? I don't understand why you're—"

"Where was he born?"

For several minutes she didn't speak at all. I watched a muscle tighten in her jaw. She was preparing to "handle" me as she had so many times before.

"You know where he was born."

"Where? You tell me."

"In Carpenter. A little hospital—Greaves Memorial."

"When?"

The jaw muscle jumped. "June 8, 1968." She reached out for me when I started to rise. "Alan." her eyes leveled with mine. "I can't go through it again. I won't put the boys through any more. Moving every few months, losing five or six jobs a year, the police, d.t.'s—" She drew a shaky breath. "Remember what I told you the last time?"

"Of course," I felt lightheaded, somewhat unsteady, but still in control. "You said that's just what it was—the last time. Next time don't come home' were your exact words, I believe. Well, it was the last time, wasn't it? Haven't I been sober every day since?"

Her hand dropped from my arm. "I hope so," she whispered, and turned away while I made purposely for the phone.

"I'm sorry, sir," the operator said. "The lines are out in Carpenter due to the storm. Please try your call again."

"The phones are down there," I told Sharon. "The storm. I'll try again."

Without a word, she turned away from me and went into the kitchen.

The door to my den was closed. Warily, I cracked it and peered

in. A night light glowed on a bedside table. Beanbag chairs slumped under the window, a dresser, bookshelves, small desk, walls thick with pop posters, and boy-type things. That morning my desk had been there, a recliner, a small tv, and the work table with the model I'd been making strewn across it.

The head on the pillow stirred. Eyes like mine focused on me in the doorway.

"You want something, Dad?"

"You're not my son," I told him softly.

Did I imagine something besides innocence in his open face? "Goodnight, Dad."

The night passed, sleepless, slow. I sat with my family at a silent breakfast and watched the boy. He ate heartily, piling food into his face as if he belonged.

"Where do you go to school?" I asked him suddenly.

"Aw, jeez, Dad!" Pete flung down his fork and pushed away from the table.

"Stop it, Alan!" Sharon's voice was sharp, raw; I'd heard her turning restlessly through the night. "You know where he goes to school."

"Where?"

She hurled the answer. "Dumont Junior High!"

"Where before that? Let him answer."

3 "It's okay, Mom. I went to seventh grade in Belleville—I think." The boy's gaze snaked to mine. "We moved around so much, sometimes I lose track."

Pete clattered down the hall. I started to rise. "Wait. Pete. I'll walk to the bus stop with you."

He didn't look at me. "Can't today. No time. Come on, Jerry, we'll be late."

I watched them leave together. Neither said a goodbye. It was like viewing from a distance some scene where I couldn't possibly be involved. As I started for the door Sharon stopped me. Her expression was grim.

"No more of this, Alan. I mean it. If you're starting some—some more craziness, I'm through. Either get help for whatever it is or—or—"

I smiled at her from my distance. "I know. Don't come home."

Snow was high on the sidewalks, crisp under my feet. I was late; Johnson had caught an earlier bus and I rode downtown in

busy silence, my head pounding from lack of sleep and the thoughts careening through it. Hold on, Coombs. Your demons are buried. You don't imagine things anymore—you're cured, a new man, New Man.

At Local Finance, Johnson glanced up from his desk. "Hey, Alan. You're late. Novello be on your tail."

"Johnson, remember me telling you about my son Jerry?"

"What?" A button lit up on his phone. "You never told me anything about your kids, man." All business, he purred into the phone.

The morning mail lay on my desk waiting to be opened and distributed. Local Finance—a crappy job in a crappy town, small beginning for a new man. Novello's office door was closed; with only a minute's hesitation I reached for my phone. Obviously, the junior high would be covered—the grade school in Belleville would have the answer.

The woman answering had nothing more pressing in her life than talking to me on the phone.

"Oh, Mr. Coombs, I'm sorry. Didn't you know about our fire? Let me tell you, it was terrible, just *whoosh* and it was gone—well, it was so old, you know. All our records were destroyed. Actually everything was destroyed—well that's not quite true, Miss Lewis managed to save her world globe—ran back into the history room like a maniac and came out carrying that silly globe. Had almost all her hair singed off for that heroic effort. What did you say the boy's name was—Jerry Coombs? How do you spell that last name? I don't remember any Coombs and I've been here fourteen years, but if you were just here a short while it's possible I—what? Well, I suppose District Superintendent Smith might be able to help you, but I believe he's out of town. His sister died and . . ."

Very carefully, I laid the receiver back in its cradle and watched the pencil shaking in my hand. Novello's door opened and his ugly face poked through.

"Alan? A minute, please?"

His office was cramped, cluttered, smelling of many stale cigars. Cautiously I seated myself before him. This man was responsible for my job; he'd hired me as a favor to a friend of his and a fellow AA acquaintance of mine.

"Half-hour late this morning, Alan—no call, nothing. Mail's not opened yet. Something wrong?" He stuffed the air with fat brown smoke.

"No—sorry, Stan. I should've called. It won't happen again."

"Hope not." His jowls bunched in a grin. "You've been doing a fine job here. I took you in on faith, you know. Sure would hate to see you screw up."

"Oh, I won't, believe it. I'm a new man."

"Good, good." He propelled me to the door. "Get out there and hustle. You've got a good future here if you don't blow it."

He lounged in the door, watching, while I picked up the mail with unsteady fingers and started the highly skilled job of slitting envelopes.

Although I half expected it, no one was waiting at the bus stop that night; but he was waiting at home, open-faced and smiling, no hint of reproach at my behavior.

"Hi, Dad. How are things at the old finance company?"

Pete was out, staying overnight with a friend. He'd done that often in the past during the worst times, and Sharon's tight face let me know she remembered.

Dinner was a nightmare. All semblance of family conversation absent. We ate silently, me separate, Sharon and the boy joined by some invisible but obvious bond. Sides were being taken—it seemed I was on mine alone. Several times I glanced at him, and each time met his eyes—young, innocent, yet shining with something that didn't belong there.

After dinner I stared mindlessly at television. Sharon read. When Jerry finished his homework, he joined us, settling on the floor between us on the couch. Almost immediately, he moved, nestling against my leg and I jumped, repelled by his touch. Sharon's glare followed me from the room and hung over me while I prepared for what would prove to be another sleepless night.

On the following morning, I deliberately stayed in my room until he left for school. I heard the door close. I sat on my bed, waiting. Her face was flushed, furious, but I was in control.

"Save your breath." I was proud of the way I sounded—firm, steely. "I'm getting to the bottom of this whether you like it or not. You're turning Pete against me again and, by God, I won't stand for it. I'm going up to see Mother today. The only family I have left—she'll sure as hell know how many sons I have!"

I guess I shouted. A look of fear flashed over her face. She hesitated, then knelt beside me, taking both my hands in hers.

"Alan, please. Can't you see something's wrong? Let me call a doctor. Maybe you're having a kind of flashback or something. I'm so proud of you. You've done so well. We've started to put our

lives back together and—please, Alan, let me get someone to help you!”

I threw her off; I remember doing it with disdain and style. “No more doctors! I’ve done all that—God, have I gone through doctors! I’m cured, God damn it, *sober*, and you’ll never know what I went through to get here. I couldn’t do it again. Stop trying to tear me down, destroy me, you—just leave me alone!”

Tires screamed, skidding in packed snow. I caught a glimpse of her face in the front window as the car roared away. I drove too fast; miles and hours flashed by my window and I was aware of horns blaring and dark shapes squealing away from me several times, but the car wouldn’t seem to slow, so I gripped the wheel and held on. A young face looking much like mine rode with me. My mother—she would set it right.

“What a nice surprise, Mr. Coombs. We haven’t seen you in a long time. She’s in the crafts room. I don’t know how you’ll find her; she has good days and bad ones, you know.”

I followed a starched white back down a hallway, keeping my eyes on the square tiles in the floor. The shadowy shapes in the rooms, in the hall around me, didn’t exist. An old man in a wheelchair reached out, and clutched my arm. “Frank?” I jerked away and bit my tongue to still my nausea.

“Joanna? It’s your son, Alan. He’s come to surprise you, isn’t that nice? Let me just take you into the cafeteria so you can have a nice talk.”

I was left alone with an old woman in a wheelchair. Her lips fluttered constantly, hands rolled and unrolled her bathrobe belt. Clouded old eyes met mine.

“Who are you?”

“Alan, Mama. You remember Alan, don’t you?”

“Why, of course. Nice boy, Alan. Prettiest baby I ever saw.”

“How are you?”

“Why am I here? There’s nothing but old folks here. I want to go home.” Her attention wandered away; I held her arm to bring her back.

“Mama, you *do* know me? Alan, your son?”

“I know my son. You take me for a fool?” She shook a finger at me. “I have three sons—Alan, Theodore, and Clover. They all want me to live with them, and I’ve been thinking about going.”

I felt tears behind my eyes. “No, Mama! Me—I’m the only

child you have. Just me—Alan. I need your help. Help me, Mama. Do you remember my wife, Sharon?" She stared at me with no expression. "Sharon? And Pete? My little boy, Pete? Remember him?" She frowned. Was she trying to remember? "Did I have another son, Mama? I never did, did I? Never had a boy named Jerry?"

She leaned forward and slapped her thighs. A thin sound trickled from somewhere inside her; she was laughing. "Jerry!" she cooed, and slapped her thighs again. "Fine boy, Jerry. Prettiest baby I ever saw. How is Jerry, Alan?"

I didn't realize I was running until a shape rose from behind the entry desk. "Mr. Coombs? While you're here could I speak to you about your mother's bill? We've written you several times—"

The cold outside air knifed into my lungs and stayed there through the ride back home. My hands were numb on the wheel; several times I raised them and shook them to be sure they belonged to me.

It was dark when I careened back into the driveway. The car's back end swung; slamming into one of Sharon's tiny new trees. On the other side of the hedge, old Mrs. Harris staightened, clutching the evening paper.

"My goodness, Mr. Coombs! You shouldn't drive so fast in this kind of weather, you'll have an accident for sure. Would you look what that paper boy did—threw it in the hedge again. Inconsiderate boy. That reminds me, about your son, Jerry ..." I snapped around to face her. "Do you know what he did? Shoveled all my walks this afternoon. Just looked out and there he was. Mowed my yards all last summer and now this—wouldn't take so much as a cup of cocoa for his trouble. You and your wife must be proud of him, he's a good boy."

The front door crashed behind me; pictures rattled on my walls. I knocked a dining room chair over in my race to the kitchen. Sharon looked up and saw me; she stumbled backward, pressed into the refrigerator door.

"This is your last chance!" I heard my echoes roaring off the walls. "Who is he? I want the answer. Now!"

Already tears brimmed in her eyes. "Alan, please, don't—"

"Tell me who he is!"

She bit her lip; one hand rose, then fell limp against her side. "Stay calm, Alan, please stay calm. You're supposed to—a man named Johnson called. Mr. Novello wants to see you first thing tomorrow morning. You're ... I think it's about your job, Alan.

You didn't call in or anything." The first tears rolled. "Why don't you call Mr. Johnson and then—"

Her head snapped back into the refrigerator door. I was trying to talk, tell her I couldn't take any more and had to know the truth, but the words wouldn't come out, and I just kept shaking her until hands took me by the shoulders and flung me against the wall. The breath shot out of me and I hung there, grunting, staring up at Pete's closed face.

"Never do that again, you hear?" The voice was ragged, adolescent, but he was stronger than I, and we both knew it. "I was always too little and scared to stop you before, but I'm not now. Don't ever touch my mother like that again."

I had to get out, away. I couldn't breathe, my head pounded, pools of red mist undulated in my eyes. Still bent over like some damned hunchback, I shuffled away from them down the hall and flung open the door of what I knew to be my den.

"Who are you? I'll kill you if you don't tell!"

He looked back at me from that face so like mine and said, "I don't know what you mean, Dad. I'm your son."

Suddenly I was crying. Sagging into the door frame, I heard myself whispering a litany of "You're not my son, you're not my son, you're not my son—"

He just stood watching me. His eyes gleamed and he smiled. And smiled and smiled. I turned and ran.

Several days passed, I know, but I don't know how many—I remember only flashes. My first real awareness returned with the sound of announcements coming from a loudspeaker. I was sitting in a station. The train station. I recognized it. The waiting room heaved with people, all hurrying in different directions; until my hearing returned to normal it was like watching the Keystone Kops. I found myself enjoying it; nothing like a little free entertainment. I slouched alone on a long bench—the stink and condition of my clothes told my why. Cheap liquor fumes shimmered the air around me; clutched in my arms was a brown paper bag. Tenderly, carefully, I looked inside—good, the bottle was three quarters full.

Leaning back, I scratched the stubble on my face, content to sit and watch the people going by. So I was in the train station—good a place to be as any. I felt at peace, benign. The world moved around me and that was fine with me.

A blare from the loudspeaker announced a new arrival. People

appeared in the distance, surging toward me. With some amusement, I spotted a brother in the forefront. His jaunty step and fragile veneer of confidence wavered before my knowing eyes. He was sure he'd licked whatever his particular demons were, he was whole again, a new man, New Man. But there was a shudder in his gait and imperceptible fissures in his fragile shell that only I, a fellow new man, could see. I watched him pass and walk away, and then a voice floated from the pack behind him, a child's voice, a clear voice as familiar to me as my own.

"Excuse me? Have you seen my dad? Roger Steed? A dark man with horn-rimmed glasses? Excuse me, please, have you seen Roger Steed?"

He broke through the crowd almost in front of me, a boy tall for his age, a young mirror of my fellow new man striding confidently away. Only his voice was the same, and his eyes, those strange shining eyes. For just a whisper they brushed mine and locked there. He looked deep inside me, and smiled. Then he was gone, hurrying after the man named Roger Steed.

Brown paper rustled—the bottle lifted out almost eagerly. I looked after the tall departing figure and the smaller persistent shadow of the boy.

I raised the bottle. And drank deep.

Four Days Before the Snow

by A. R. MORLAN

Babies, they claimed, were a blessing. But not the crawling things that inhabited her dreams and that turned her waking hours into a nightmare.

She was covered with them. Dozens. Their pudgy legs dug hard into her belly and breasts as they inched up her prostrate body. Finely fleshed palms traced the contours of her face. *Try to move. Can't.* Too many of them. Too much weight pushing down her arms, her legs. No good—even if she could move, could throw off the covers, they'd fall to the floor and break. And how could anyone get up and walk across a floor of broken babies? *Better feign sleep.*

More babies coming. Thumping sounds against the metal legs of the daybed and base of the couch, shockingly hard noises for such soft, maulable little bodies. Surging against the bed, *thuwunk, thuwunk . . .*

Maureen opened her eyes. Faint daylight made the window a luminous rectangle in the wall before her, a shape which hung, disconnected, before her line of sight. Worming a hand out from under the covers, she rubbed it across her eyes, hard, until an eyelash got caught under the lid. Maureen closed her eyes tightly, until the tears came. When she opened them again, the rectangle was softer, more washed-out. Soft was better this early in the morning—oh God, those soft babies. They were still on her, she could see them faintly, and feel their oppressive weight . . . With great trepidation she inched her hand down toward her chest—and came in contact with soft fur. Pooter-kitty let out a trilling *purrrupt?* and stretched out a dainty paw toward Maureen. Of course. What with Pooter and Digger and Smoo sleeping on her all night, she was

bound to dream about babies. Sometimes she and Larry even joked about having three furry kids.

Relaxing with that thought, she moved up in the bed until her shoulders were resting against the back of cushions. Pooter rode up on Maureen's chest, digging in with her claws, and hung on. (One was painfully sharp and stuck in Maureen's left breast.) Digger was a dead weight across his mistress's pelvis, and Smoo-boo discovered that two wiggling feet equaled one mousie-under-the-covers. The other half of the bed was empty. Maureen almost called out "Larry?" since the digital clock next to her read 6:45, and it only took him ten minutes to get ready for work and another minute to get there for the seven-to-three shift, but she remembered him telling her last night over supper (Banquet Western dinners, his favorite) that Steve and Julie's van had broken down and that he'd been leaving early to give them a ride. Which meant that he'd taken the Pinto, which in turn meant that she could just forget about going uptown today for some eggs and hamburger. Walking a mile and a half in five-below weather was out, and she'd be goddamned if she'd ride the Ski-Doo even if it was legal in the city limits; no way was she going to give those polyester princesses in the parking lot with their Mark V's and station wagons a chance to flash the old half-smile and turned-up eyes at her. It was bad enough waiting in the checkout line with a cartful of generics and store-brand groceries, and having some former classmate of hers from EHS trot up with *her* cart full of Libby's, Hunt's, and Campbell's goodies, which would lead to the inevitable "Is your Larry still working at the mill? Oh, my Bryan? I guess you didn't see the article about his Jaycee award in the *Herald*. Well, it's on page . . ." No, if Larry didn't leave her any wheels, Larry didn't get his scrambled eggs tomorrow morning. As if he couldn't get them himself.

She hoped that Steve and Julie would have enough sense to take the van up to Miller's Auto *now* and get the stupid clunker fixed; Maureen could just imagine them letting it go because Larry was giving them a ride. A free ride, probably; he couldn't ask his ice-fishing buddy to pay for a little thing like \$1.10 a gallon gas, now could he?

Sighing, Maureen closed her eyes and tried to snuggle back under the covers (*no use getting up, just have to turn up the heat*), but as soon as the covers touched her chin, the baby feeling came back. The pressure and heat from all those bodies made her skin ache. That had been one awful dream. No, strike that—nightmare.

Nothing *bad* had happened, nothing horrid, but something that real and (her flesh rippled with the tactile memory of it) so *suffocating* had to be a nightmare. Which was odd, because no one would believe that dreaming about babies, sweet-breathed, cooing, tiny googoes, could be so repulsive.

It was useless. She had to crawl out of that warm, comforting bed and get dressed. After those babies, it was no longer pleasant to lie there (and she was never going to get used to the metal bar under her back). Reluctantly Maureen rolled Pooter onto Larry's half of the bed and threw back the covers. The rush of cold made her bladder ache. She searched the carpet with her feet for her slippers. Gone. With three cats around the house and nothing to occupy them for eight hours besides digging the litter out of the pan and clawing the drapes, it wasn't surprising. Her blanket-cloth pj's had attached footies, not that they'd be much help on a morning like this. Larry had probably turned the heat down too much last night. Funny, those babies had been so hot, even though they were naked . . . Even the cats didn't generate that much heat, not even in summertime. The skin under her top felt hot. (*Oh jeeze, Maureen, of course it's hot, Pooter was sleeping there, you idjit!*) Maureen's head felt like someone had tilted it and poured a bottle of Elmer's down her ear until her brain was a sticky, solidifying mess. Shaking it, she thought, *That was one hell of a bad dream, nightmare, whathaveyou.*

She got up, stretched until some bones in her spine popped, then hunkered down to look under the daybed for her slippers. Abruptly Maureen let out a hollow moan and sank to the floor in a graceless sprawl. One of them was under there, a vague pink shape huddled next to the base of the couch. A baby. That's where they had come from, the babies were hiding in the hole, in that empty gaping space where the bed folded into the couch during the day, only now it was filled with hiding babies, dozens of soft babies crammed together while Larry slept with her, only to stir and stretch and creep out after he left, clambering onto the bed to pat her face and bruise her body, dozens more of them bumping up against the bed . . . They had hurried up and crawled away to hide, when she woke, but one of them straggled, maybe lingered for a last gawk at her, and didn't make it back into the hole. She wasn't sure, but something shiny and round was glinting down there, waiting for her to reach under the bed: *Please put your hand under this bed, just hold out your hand* . . . Her full bladder began

to let go, slowly, a few drops slipping down her thighs, but if that baby moved—

Smoo-boo jumped off the bed with a *purrup!* and scurried under it. White body faintly luminescent in the darkness of the room, Smoo made a beeline to the baby. Maureen tried to cry out—babies can hurt little kitties, Mom had told her so many years ago, or was it the other way around? Surely something would hurt something—but no sound would come out of her open mouth, and Smoo (butt wiggling, tail twitching) pounced on the baby and dragged his prey proudly out to her.

"Oh, Smoobie . . ." Her voice was as thin as a newborn's cry. Smoo *purruped* in reply and dragged Maureen's pink, button-trimmed slippers onto her wet lap. Pressing his furry body against hers, *tight*, she giggled nervously into his pink-lined ear, "Come on, Smoobie, Momma's gotta get up and clean herself off."

After turning on the radio (WIFC out of Wausaw—"Where the music does the talking") and throwing her soggy pajama bottoms in the bathtub, Maureen pulled on Larry's brown robe and walked the few steps into the kitchen. The floor was hopscotched with a grid of wet paper towels. Attached to the refrigerator door with a photo-magnet (Maureen holding Digger upside down on her lap) was a note in Larry's handwriting—*Dont blame me if Smoo smells like a baby "Daddy" spilled the milk on him Sorry bout the mess*. Maureen sopped up the excess liquid on the floor with the towels before wadding them up and pitching them. The three cats followed her into the kitchen; Maureen took her first good look at Smoo and said, "You poor thing, you look like Billy Idol," while rubbing down his spiky white fur with a fresh paper towel. He did smell milky, a lot like a baby . . . Her stomach did a flip-flop and she decided to skip solid food this morning. She poured a cupful of cider into a small pot and set it on MED.

Padding back into the living room (a whole ten-foot walk), Maureen carefully folded the blankets and top sheet in toward the middle of the mattress—the folding mechanism chewed up the bedding—before taking hold of the far end and lifting it. From this vantage point the bed, with its pink top blanket, looked like a tongue sticking out of a brown tweed mouth. Sort of like a man with a beard and mustache around his lips, or a guy's whang going in—She shook the thought away, that was too close to her nightmare.

"Shit, how silly can a person get?" she mumbled, pushing the

bed back into the yawning cavity between the arms of the couch. Imagine, *babies* living in there . . . Where would they all go when she put the bed back in? Besides, no way could you fit that many little babies in that space, it was only a double bed. Not enough babies could ever squeeze in there, certainly not enough to come pouring out in masses like that.

Maureen threw the cushions back onto the couch, then covered it with the throw, an old ripcord brown bedspread. Not that it did more than just cover up the damage; the cats could, and did, crawl under it and claw the fabric until the sides of the piece were the consistency of angel hair. Periodically Larry would look under the cover and yell, "Fer Christ all Friday, Maureen, either get those cats declawed or I'll never buy you another piece of furniture again, whaddya think I'm *working* for?" and she'd continue to sit there eating or sewing or watching tv, not saying anything, but knowing he was right, that he had a point, but also knowing that declawing was so cruel (even Larry felt that way), and so expensive . . . Besides, what did he expect her to use for money at the veterinarian's office? Maybe he expected her to take the operations out in trade. That thought made her laugh out loud; sorry, but the vet wasn't her type. If she was lucky, she wasn't his type either!

The couch finished, Maureen crossed the room to the thermostat and turned it from fifty-six to sixty-two. It came on with a muted purr. Whenever she heard people (especially those polyester princesses) in the bank or the IGA talking about how they made the Supreme Sacrifice in the name of Conservation by turning the heat *down* to sixty-five at night, Maureen had to stifle a laugh and the question, "What would you gals do at *my* house?—freeze your cunts off?" Alone, she could let out a sour laugh over the irony of it all.

The silver pot was jiggling on the burner when she reentered the kitchen. Silly little aluminum two-cup pot with a bent handle. Part of her wedding stash. Some bonanza of goodies *that* was, she thought as she poured the bubbling cider into her cold mug, which she then carried to the table. A four-slice toaster, two jelly roll pans (who the fuck made *jelly rolls* anymore?), a set of cheap pots and pans, five sets of towels in five different colors and patterns, a blender that broke, and one set of flatware. Whoopie ding-dong. And a whopping seventy-five dollars in cash, mostly fives. That had gone for the second-hand daybed.

Warming her cold fingers by wrapping them around the white

china mug, Maureen read the words surrounding the blue windmill which decorated its front: *OLD DUTCH FOODS Northeast Distributors Wayne and Ruby Mesabi Ewerton WI 561-7968*. Larry had worked for the Mesabis for six months after their wedding, delivering chips to the bars, the high school, the IGA, Applebaum's and the bowling alley, and getting to take home the stale bags of snacks because Ruby and Wayne felt sorry for him and Maureen, living in the shitty part of town as they (still) did and being newlyweds and all. She wished she had a dime for every bag of barbecue and onion and garlic chips she'd eaten for lunch in that half-year. Not with lunch, but *for* lunch. That was before the opening at the paper mill three years ago. Steve and Julie had clued Larry in on that one, before the notice appeared in the paper, so Maureen supposed that Larry did owe them a free ride this morning, and every other morning. The pay at Old Dutch was a lot less that he was getting now—a *whole* lot less—but at least his hours had been regular, none of this changing-shifts-every-two-weeks shit, and they had been able to *do* things together, even if it was only playing marathon games of 500 or sitting on the hill behind the drive-in and trying to lip-read a movie. Now they'd listen to the rock radio until five thirty, then they'd turn on the tv, usually with her watching and him dozing in his chair by the window, and eventually she'd end up watching him snore softly through his open mouth and wonder what kind of chemicals he was breathing in at the mill, or what he was absorbing in through his skin. Sure, they said it was safe, but how come Steve had those boils on his face (and he'd never been a pizza face in high school)? And as for Larry—well, they never discussed it, but there was a tacit nighttime agreement that if she asked and he refused, it wasn't because of not *wanting* to . . . Oh sure, the working conditions were safe all right, isn't that what they told those people in *Silkwood*? Conditions there were really hot, all right.

Maureen sipped her breakfast slowly, swirling the hot liquid around in her mouth before swallowing. The mug was about as ridiculous as the pot with the bent handle (*his side gave us that*); the mug's handle had an opening just big enough to accomodate her forefinger, and she wore a size six ring. Larry didn't try to fight it, he just held his like a tumbler. That worried Maureen; china conducted heat like something else, and Larry never seemed to feel it. Probably those goddamned chemicals—

thuwunk



Maureen slammed her mug down on the table so hard that the amber liquid sloshed over the rim, leaving a large puddle on the Formica top. The ersatz wood paneling pressed in around her as she waited, not breathing, until the sound came again (*they're outside, they're waiting for me outside, all those cold little babies, milling around—*), *thuwwunk . . . thuwwunk . . .* The noise was coming from outside the house, probably the front porch. Throwing her parka over Larry's robe, Maureen ran to the front door.

The frigid air felt dry and hard in her mouth and nose, stinging her forehead and cheeks. The sky was a malignant opal; washed-out blue, faint gold, and grimy white, overlaid with dirty swirls of smoke from the rows of unpainted houses across the street. Blackened tree branches, coated thickly with frost, etched jagged chiaroscuro lines across everything, giving her neighborhood a shattered, broken look. No one else was outside, not even the bent old man from Crescent Street, walking his shaggy black mutt. No kids, none at all in the neighborhood, not since the bottle blonde bitch from upstairs had moved out—skipped town, to put a fine point on it—with her four rug rats. The apartment to the back of the house had been empty for going on three years now, ever since that night when old lady Winston had the stroke and the ambulance took her and her husband away. Palmer Winston had come back long enough to throw his clothes into a battered gladstone and his few belongings into a Lux detergent box, and after the funeral the Winstons' son had cleaned out the rest of the furniture.

Maureen leaned against one of the five wooden uprights which held up the porch roof, looking down the street both ways. No snow last night, so no snowplows to make a strange noise. The grey house on the corner showed some sign of life, or movement at least; the car was idling in the driveway, sending fragile plumes of grey exhaust into the icy air. She didn't know the name of the people who owned the Volvo; had never seen them up close, or talked to them. Maureen didn't know any of her neighbors by name, which was the way she and Larry liked it—most of the time, anyway. They had been on a first-name basis with the Winstons, out of politeness, and sort of knew the shrew upstairs, but only under duress. (Even if the bitch's hair was bleached almost white, Maureen didn't think that *white* was what the woman put down under "race" on her driver's license, but she couldn't figure out whether her ex-neighbor had been passing; Amerindian, Hispanic, or what Larry's family called "Eye-tailian" . . . Whichever she was,

Maureen always thought that dark-skinned women got kind of homely once they hit thirty, and Ms. Bleach Blonde was at *least* thirty-five.) The blonde bomber and her brood had blown the neighborhood after Larry called the cops out after her kids last July; they'd been letting the air out of the Pinto's tires. Once Social Services had gotten wind of it, she'd been asked to move somewhere else in town, but she'd beaten them to the punch by loading up her Scout (*paid for with our tax money*, Maureen thought bitterly) with her few trashy belongings and runty brats. She did leave her roaches, as well as several unpaid bills . . . which the county had picked up. Funny, Maureen couldn't remember the tramp's name, but she couldn't forget her hands. Her fingernails were long and always filthy, which was strange, considering that the only manual labor she ever performed was picking up her food stamps and welfare checks. A week after she'd moved, when the landlord's wife cleaned out the apartment, the Orkin truck from Wausaw had pulled to a stop in front of the house, and Larry had rechristened their dear departed neighbor *La Cucaracha*. Maureen had only stopped looking for the little brown buggies last month, when it got good and cold. No one had come by to look at either apartment. Sometimes, when she was just about to fall asleep, Maureen would hear Ms. La C. shrilling, "You'll pay, you sonsabitches!" at their locked front door before trotting off in her miniskirt to her Scout and driving away into the hot July night.

Yes, it was worth it to be reclusive. Even if it meant that she only had the cats for company on most days, it was still worth it. However, it was *not* worth being the only person standing outdoors today; not in January, and certainly not while she wasn't wearing any pants—

thuwunk

She spun around so fast that her slippers almost lost purchase on the slick porch floor. At first she didn't see it. Then she looked down and saw it at the edge of her vision, rolling around on its side next to the front wall of the house.

A baby-food jar.

Maureen had put the jar in the garbage and taken it out again twice before two o'clock that afternoon. She knew it would sound silly, and the very silliness of it all nearly stopped her, but she finally decided to show it to Larry when he got home. Maybe he'd even get a laugh out of it, out of the coincidence of her dreaming

about those babies (*funny, we weren't even talking about kids, not even Steve and Julie's, I wonder what made me—*) and being wakened by the sound of this baby-food jar rolling on the porch. Stranger than the coincidence was the fact that it *was* on the porch in the first place, what with no kids in the neighborhood of any age, and garbage day being Monday, three days ago, much too long for a jar to lay low without being seen. Weird, how she personalized the jar, gave it a life and will of its own, just because it had a cute baby face on the label; but the circumstances aided her fantasy. What else could she think about a supposedly inanimate object that just *happened* to find its way onto the porch (up three steps, no less) when it had no business being in this part of town in the first place? Now if there were kids living on the block, or if La C. the Blonde were still in town, just looking for ways to make trouble, Maureen never would have given the appearance of the jar another thought. But, damn it, there wasn't so much as a dog running around their street . . . Whether it was spooky or just a fluke, it would be worth talking about over their dinner, something besides Larry's litany about how he hated this job. Besides, Larry loved that "Believe It or Not!" kind of shit.

She picked up the jar and studied it. The label was red, with the oh-so-cute Gerber baby on the front (Larry's mom had told her once that Humphrey Bogart was the model for the baby, but Larry's mom bought the *Globe* and the *Enquirer* with religious punctuality every Monday, so Maureen was a *teensy* bit skeptical about that information), and stated that this jar, when full, had contained "Junior Strained Potatoes." The label wasn't a bit dirty or torn. Inside, the jar contained the moist residue of whitish strained potatoes. *Somebody must've put this on the porch*, she decided. *It would've shattered if it had been thrown or even rolled at the wall. No animal could've done it, and there was just no way the wind could've picked it up.* Placing the jar on the counter, Maureen thought, *If it's a joke, I'm not laughin', folks*, then turned her attention to picking out a frozen dinner for each of them tonight. She hoped Steve got the van fixed.

Maureen waited until after Larry assured her that the van was indeed fixed to tell him her story and show him the jar. But telling it made it seem so trivial; her reactions were so personal, so wrapped up in her own private observations and reflections, that her recitation became banal and flat. Not even all those speech and

creative writing classes she took at EHS helped. Her fear seemed so . . . small, unimportant. She smiled weakly when done.

Larry pushed his chair away from the table, shook a cigarette out of his hard pack, lit the match on the sole of his shoe, and blew out a grey cloud which hovered over their empty metal dinner trays like a frown before it drifted into the living room.

"You mean to say that this baby-food jar here woke you up? Jeeze, that does beat all." He took another puff, and exhaled, "'S a good thing you weren't dreaming 'bout a Mack truck rolling over you, or 'bout getting blown up by a—"

"That's not funny."

"True. Now peeing yourself when you thought your slippers were a baby, *that's* funny." He blew his smoke at the ceiling, tilting back in his chair.

Maureen got up and took the dirty trays over to the sink. "Next time you piss up the bed after downing a six-pack," she said over her shoulder, "I'll have to remind you how funny it is." She threw the jar into the trash bag.

"What's got you pissed off?" Larry took his coffee mug into the other room, trailing ashes on the carpet. He sat down in his chair, and Pooter jumped on his lap. He stroked her tabby fur with his free hand, having balanced his mug on the arm of the chair. Maureen placed an ash tray on the other arm, then slumped into her usual spot on the sofa.

"I said, what's got you pissed off? It was kinda strange, but you gotta admit, after eight hours at that place—" he jerked his cigarette toward the mill— "I'm not about to jump up and down over a coincidence. Hell, the only reason you dreamed about babies was 'cause the cats was on top of you, and the jar was just . . . just . . ." He fished around for the word, lost the bait, and then went on, "Pooter's got a nail needs clipping."

Maureen took that for a truce. "Yeah, I noticed this morning. She nearly took my boob off with it."

"Then why didn't you cut it?" Larry looked at the unvacuumed rug at his feet.

"The way she claws and bites? No thanks. Here, you do it." She threw him the nail clippers.

Flipping the protesting cat onto her back, Larry pushed out her claws one by one until he found the offending nail. "You didn't have a minute to do this, but I see you had the time to do your nails up red. Must've taken all day to do that."

She curled her hands and hid them under her armpits. Faking a shiver, she asked, "You think we should turn the heat up?"

"It's only my money." Pooter jumped off Larry's lap, shook her hind foot at him, and scooted off. Smoo woke up and took off after her. Larry watched him. "Forget it, Smoob, she's spayed. You're not her type anyhow."

Maureen thought of the vet, and of taking it out in trade.

"What are you giggling about? I thought you were so cold."

She got up and turned on the tv, WGN. "I'm all right, forget it."

They watched *WKRP in Cincinnati*, the one where Jennifer and Herb get stuck in the elevator together. Having seen it several times, Maureen and Larry talked during the dull spots, stopping only for the funny lines they knew were coming.

"What was so bad about having babies on you? They don't bite, y'know."

After a bit: "I just don't like them."

"Why?"

Come on, Larry, let it go. She shrugged. "I dunno. They stink, make a mess."

"And these guys don't?" He pointed his cigarette at the cats, now curled up in a huge furry mass in front of the register by the tv. Keeping her eyes on the tube, she shrugged again.

They watched a little more of the show in silence (Herb was telling Jennifer that his wife didn't give him "num-nums" unless he mowed the lawn first; Larry snorted, "Is that all you got to do?") until he suddenly asked, "How come we ain't had a kid yet?"

"What?" The popping sound her neck made when she turned her head was stunningly loud.

"You heard me. Why not?" he asked in a too-casual tone.

"We can't afford to turn up the heat and you want a kid?" *Make it light, Maur.*

"I didn't say I wanted one, I just asked why you didn't get yourself knocked up right after we got hitched, like all your girlfriends did."

Feeling shaky, Maureen kept her voice light. "They didn't get p.g. by themselves, asshole. Using your own finger just doesn't work."

"Don't make a federal case outta it, I was just trying to pay you a compliment." He lit another cigarette and resumed watching the show.

Waiting until the Jello feeling in her guts subsided, Maureen asked, "I must be a dumb shit—how was that supposed to be a compliment?", fighting the part of her mind that kept yelling (no, screaming), *Let it go, don't pry, don't . . .*

"Y'know, I drove Steve and Julie home after work, like I told you before, only they invited me in for a while after the baby-sitter went home, and what with those rug rats running around, screeching and crawling all over the place, we all got to talking about how expensive it is to raise up kids, and Julie said they needed new shoes for—" Larry put his hand about three feet from the floor—"the middle one, whatzisname?"

"Clark," Maureen whispered.

"Him, Clark. And that the bigger one, Andrea, needed a bottle of that kind of cough medicine that makes you spit up that shit in your lungs—"

"Expectorant," Maureen added automatically.

"Yeah, that crap, but Julie said if they bought one they couldn't get the other, and while she was tellin' me that, Steve starts bashing Clark for dropping the crusts from his sandwich on the floor, and I just couldn't *wait* to beat it out of there." He took a deep drag and let it out very slowly. "I mean, we went to school with these people, we were friends, and now it's like they're from another planet or something. Y'know, I felt like I was still a kid and they were my parents. I mean it was just like being home and seeing the squirts climbing all over Mom and Dad again, the way they'd talk through the kids' noise, and on top of it they had on that country crud on WAXX. I remember when Steve got caught lifting a Kiss record from the Gambles' store and I wondered when they got on one track and left us where we are. On the way home I got to thinking that maybe having kids *does* something to you, or whether it was having them when you couldn't afford them that makes people act funny. I just got to thinking that I wouldn't want to change that way . . . Hell, twenty-four is too young to be trapped like that, I've got things to—"

Maureen remembered listening to Julie and women like her, people she had grown up with and experienced things with, actually saying, "I'm glad they play KEEY in the IGA now, I couldn't stand that kids' music," and "Those punks should have to roll up their windows when they have their radios on, who wants to listen to that junk?" and remembered thinking, *Are you all so old, or didn't I grow up yet?* It was so hard to listen to her former friends now,

those old mother hens . . .

"—mean, we ain't got it that good yet, but what we got's paid for—oh, d'ja know, Steve had to take out a second loan on the van?—I mean it's just us and the cats, and I don't have to buy them shoes." Larry opened his mouth to say more, but settled for a shrug and a mumbled, "Thanks" before getting up and heading for the bathroom. Passing by the couch, he pressed his hand, palm down, fingers spread, lightly on the top of Maureen's head. After he left the room, Maureen hid her trembling hands between her thighs and rocked gently back and forth on the couch.

They were back. The babies. Dozens of them, all softly naked and smelling of burped milk and Johnson's Baby Powder, jostling each other for purchase on the blanket, making cooing, burbling sounds. She could see them through the narrow space between the top of the blanket and the lower fringes of her bangs: pink moon faces, wandering eyes, moist sucking mouths, and bloated, pudgy hands reaching for her hidden face, hidden breasts. Scrunching up her eyes, she watched them through the rainbow of her lashes. They looked like the Gerber Baby under stained glass: pink, green, violet, and blue babies, but moving, not flat and static like the baby on the label. Maureen could feel their warm, moist breath on her forehead. A pair of damp, soft hands pushed aside her hair, gooey lips made contact with her skin—

Thrashing her way out of the covers, Maureen beat at her face, her head, falling to the floor in a tangle of blankets and sheets. *Oh God*, she thought, *the cats, I've hurt the cats, I've fallen on*—but as she looked about the semidark room, she could see Digger stretched out across the back of Larry's chair, Pooter curled up in Larry's place below her brother, and Smoo pressed against the register. *But I felt them, I did*, her mind protested, *there was something all over me*. Dazed, she stumbled over to the window, and yanked up the shade. Larry had taken the Ski-Doo to work; the Pinto was parked where Larry left it yesterday afternoon, cardboard held in place over the windshield by the wiper blades so she wouldn't have to scrape ice this morning. Larry was no prince (not even a Polish one), but at least he thought of her once in a while. The sight of the car was both comforting and reassuring; it was hard, black, and solid, and pushed away those baby thoughts . . . until she backed away from the window, and saw the jar.

Turning the jar endlessly in her hands, Maureen felt its coldness invade her entire body. She wasn't going to show it to Larry, oh no, no, *no*, not after the way he'd praised her last night, how he'd thanked her for their childless state. She was certainly the one to thank, all right. And she wouldn't tell him about this latest dream, either. No baby talk. No mentioning babies. Maureen pressed the jar, lid first, into the soft part of her guts, level with her womb, until she bared her teeth in a soundless grimace from the sheer cool pain of it. Funny, when she had aborted herself, she didn't recall that it had hurt this bad.

She had confirmed her pregnancy a little over a month after their honeymoon. Every since her first period eight years before (it had come on her birthday, her eleventh, and Mom took one look at the rust-colored blight covering the blue roses on her flannel pj bottoms and yelled to Dad as he ate his breakfast of hash browns and scrambles, "Our 'Reen's a woman now," while Maureen wondered glumly if it would always feel that *sticky*), she had never been more than a day late. *Nevernevernever*. And now, two and a half weeks late.

She had spent the first two weeks telling herself that it was only the newlywed jitters, just stress making her so *damned* late, and spent the past four days downing three aspirins every four hours, an old trick she and her friends used to play on their bodies when they wanted to get their periods over in three days instead of five or six. Yesterday she had forced herself to go upstairs and ask Ms. Welfare Bitch if she'd mind picking up an *e.p.t.* kit when she went shopping. When La C. held a grimy red-nailed hand out in front of her own flat belly and flashed a questioning smile, Maureen cut her off with a curt, "I think the cat is pregnant, and I don't feel like driving ten miles to the vet, okay?" Her neighbor said she'd do it; then, just as Maureen was heading for the stairs, she added, "If you ever want to knit something, I've got some really big needles." When Maureen spun around, flaring, the Blonde Bombshell smiled and went on, "They're really great for knitting up things like cat blankets fast." Maureen told her to keep the change from the kit, and ran all the way up to the front door. The next morning, Maureen crawled out of bed early, carefully deposited her sample in the tube, and hid the kit before Larry got up. After he left, she spent nearly an hour just staring at the dark brown ring in the bottom of the tube.

Good going, she thought, you've just proved Mom right ...

like it or not. At their reception in April, Mom had solemnly predicted over her Cold Duck when it seemed like everyone was within earshot—even the frigging *band* was taking five—“I’ll be a gran’ma ‘fore this year is out,” and *everyone* had listened, just like one of those damned E. F. Hutton commercials, and Maureen had whispered to the nearest honeycomb paper bell on the wall, “Oh, *thanks* for the vote of confidence in me . . . *Mother.*” And they hadn’t gone beyond third base before the wedding rehearsal last night.

Maureen had sat at this very table, in this very apartment, staring at the six-board repeat in the very same fake wood paneling. Their third of the house had only three rooms plus a bath, and the bedroom was so small that only a nightstand and single bed might fit, so Larry parked his Ski-Doo in there . . . Certainly a crib would never fit, let alone a changing table, bassinet, high chair, potty, and whatever else a kid had to have so that he or she wouldn’t yammer later on, “I wuz *deprived!*”

Larry wasn’t making diddly-doo yet, and considering how depressed the job situation was in Ewerton, she and Larry agreed that it would be unfair for her to work too, not as long as they were scraping by on his salary alone. For two people, “scraping by” meant living on generics and lots of unsweetened tea, but damn it, where do you buy generic baby food, or baby tea? For a moment, Maureen tried to picture Larry’s face when she’d tell him; he’d probably try to smile and have the motion get strangled on his lips as he said something like, “A googer? Great, Maur, but that’ll mean WIC food stamps and I’ll have to look into overtime . . .”

No thanks. Maureen wasn’t going to become a self-satisfied *taker*, like the Blonde Bitch (“I’ve got some really big needles”), or a welfareette, lumbering around the IGA behind a shopping cart full of plastic gallons of milk, King Vitaman cereal, and cans of o.j.; one kid sitting in the cart, kicking sneakered feet, the other still in the oven; pushing stringy hair out of her eyes as she fumbled in her purse for the requisition slip from social services—just another warm-milk baby machine, shitting out a new one every two years to keep her WIC qualification. *No way.* Maureen already balked at the thought of food stamps, even though she and Larry were both eligible for them. Larry scorned those thin booklets of stamps and those signs taped to the cash registers in all the Ewerton stores—“Please tell check-out this is a FOOD STAMP order”—but not for Maureen’s reasons. Unlike her family, his had been on welfare for years: free cheese, stamps, WIC, fuel assistance, the works, and

once, only once, while they were dating, he told Maureen how ashamed he felt every time his mom pulled that book of yellow-and-blue stamps out of her purse and he'd catch the girl behind the counter, and the people standing behind his mother, giving the both of them the fisheye. Maureen never wanted to see his eyes water behind his lashes like that again. Their being on the dole, for whatever reason, would kill him. Not literally, of course, but there were worse ways to kill a person . . .

Yet here she was, the killing knife in her belly: p.g., knocked up, a bun in the oven, in a delicate condition, in a family way, heir-conditioned, preggie, you *know* what. And damn it to hell and back and *back*, she didn't *want* a frigging kid, didn't want to be fat, bloated, and brown-blotched, didn't want it crawling out of her in a slimy mass, trailing a pulsating rope . . . It wasn't fair, fer Christ all Friday, she'd used her diaphragm and made Larry put on a rubber whenever she thought she was in her fertile time, but *damn*, this had to happen! Wait a sec, not "this," but *he* or *she* had to happen. Somehow, Maureen couldn't stomach (haw, haw, *stomach*, wasn't that a riot?) the idea of having a tiny human being bottled up inside her; better to think of it as a blob of tissue, a few cells cobbled together, no different right now than a starfish or a puppy or a salamander. Once she saw a special on tv that said how a starfish and a human looked the same shortly after conception, like a few misshapen beach balls clustered together in a huge, huge ocean.

That was more like it. Think of it as a starfish, an itsy-bitsy starfish that got started in the wrong momma. Maureen could handle that. For a second, a cartoon she'd seen in one of Larry's skin magazines popped into her head; a nurse was carrying a blanket-wrapped bundle to the startled father, saying, "Here's your baby . . . tongue," which is what it was all right, a big wet-looking bouncing baby *tongue*, and the cartoon had grossed her out when she first saw it, but now she thought, *No chance that this'll be a tongue, but it's still gross-looking right now . . . It'll be ukky and soft and shapeless for a few more days, not looking much like anything human. Didn't the biology teacher say that the sex doesn't show up for months on an embryo, or something like that? So it's still an it.*

Clinging to that thought like a lover, Maureen scurried around in the boxy apartment, rifling through the few Ewerton High School textbooks Larry'd swiped before graduation, opening and shutting

cupboards with sharp *bangs*, pouring and mixing and running water. When she was done, she carried her book, bottles, and long tube into the bathroom, the door of which she locked. (Larry wasn't due home for five hours, but she had to be alone, as alone as a pregnant woman could be.) Completely disrobing, she propped the Health 102 textbook up behind the bathtub faucets—the book was bent open at the *Female Reproductive System* chart—crawled into the empty four-foot-long tub, the clammy ceramic surface sending tingles of cold up through her bare soles into her entire body, making her nipples grow hard and raisinlike, hung the full enema bag and extra-long nozzle-tipped tubing on the shower head, then lay down, legs bent up sharply at the knees, and, after consulting the line drawing in the battered textbook, thrust the blunt end of the nozzle deep within the soft folds of her lower body, until she reached what she thought was her cervex. While trying to judge just how high up her uterus was, a wisp of regret brushed her mind, but she pushed it away brusquely. This was not something to be compared with lovemaking; it had to be separate, something cold and impersonal. After a time, she slowly retracted the tubing, then tilted her body upward, where it shone pale green in the filtered light of the green curtained window across the room. She let the saline solution do whatever it was going to do inside her for at least another ten minutes.

That done—it was just a “that,” nothing specific, just another douche . . . and if it did get bad, she could lie, “Sorry, Doctor, I grabbed the salt when I meant to pick up the baking soda,” and pray that she looked innocent and repentant enough—so, *that* done, she dressed, and swallowed four aspirins followed by a shot of Larry's carefully hoarded, special-occasion Jack Daniels, and stretched out on the living room floor, a throw pillow under her head. The cats (only Pooter and Digger back then, still kittens) had curled up next to her, and she didn't wake up until the bad cramps and nausea came, and the dark blood had soaked through her panties and jeans, right through to the maroon carpet beneath her.

She wasn't any of those things she had been that morning, things like knocked up, p.g., with child. Later she realized just how lucky she was that her salt douche hadn't burned out her uterus, or that she had stopped bleeding after only eight days, and within a couple of months she seldom thought about what she had done. Maureen hadn't felt especially guilty; after all, it could have been a

false reading on the test, and if it hadn't been, the thing inside her had been so tiny, so amorphous, not much of anything, really. And it wasn't as if Larry had been panting for her to have a kid.

"This would be its third birthday." Maureen heard the words, but couldn't understand why she'd uttered them. No one would ever know when its birthday would have been; it could have been premature, or late . . . But it was dead, history, with no one to mourn or miss it. And wasn't Larry happy that they didn't have a child or two by now? At least he was able to set aside five bucks a week toward The House with a Garage, which was the only reason they hadn't moved into the five-room apartment in the back (or into the Roach Motel upstairs, with its six rooms)—so they could save on the rent, toward the better house. Larry didn't want to live on Welfare Road forever. With a three-year-old, they'd both be working, they'd have to move into a higher-rent place, and the five bucks would be spent before it was made.

Larry had actually said "thanks." Damn it, wasn't that something? Didn't that make that morning spent in their icy tub worth it? Her Larry, who thought that no visible holes in his t-shirt meant he was dressing sharp, who spent whole free weekends polishing and waxing his Ski-Doo in the bedroom, had thanked her for not burdening him with a kid.

Sure, it would've been three; they had been married over three years. So what? Maybe in another couple of years, they both might think differently about having a baby. But what would make that baby, or the one after that, any better than the first? The thought came unbidden and unwelcome, as did the next: *I wonder what it was?* Maureen pressed the jar—this one was Junior Beans—into her guts, again and again, trying to blot out the thought.

"Run it by me again why we're always eating something out of a metal tray." Larry was testy; the machine he worked on at the mill required three people working in continuous shifts to operate properly, and if your replacement didn't come in with the new shift, you had to stay until someone showed up. Which could mean waiting for your replacement's replacement. While that happened to Larry early on in his first year there, tonight he'd only had to work almost two extra hours (the guy on the three-to-eleven shift had had a flat), and even though the two hours were double time as far as pay went, Larry was still in a bitchy mood.

"Cause of days like today. If this had been a pot roast, it'd

have been ruined." Keeping her eyes aimed at her Taste o' Sea had-dock dinner, she speared a 'tater puff and put it in her mouth.

"Might have been ruined, but it still would've been pot roast." Larry blew a cloud of smoke at her, breaking their unspoken rule that he not smoke until they were both finished eating.

"Next time, I'll make a pot roast."

Larry's blue eyes opened in amazement. "Since when do I like pot roast?"

Maureen finished her meal in silence. She didn't look up when Larry trotted off to the living room, turned on the set, and sat down. Just in time for *WKRP*.

Not for the first time, Maureen told herself that she could tell the day of the week not by the calendar, but by the tv. Sunday was *Ripley's Believe It or Not!*, some MTV, and then the *ABC Sunday Night Movie*. Monday through Friday was *WKRP*, *Barney Miller*, *Entertainment Tonight*, followed by either an hour or so of MTV or whatever prime time show they currently liked. Maybe a movie if a good one was on TBS or WGN. Saturday, *Sneak Previews*, more MTV, *At the Movies*, and *T.J. Hooker*. Sometimes the CBS *Movie* or *Love Boat*. If something was preempted or rescheduled, the whole week was thrown off kilter. After the tv was shut off for the night, they'd feed the cats (*she'd* feed the cats, Larry had the morning honors), wash up, and go to bed. It didn't even matter if Larry was on the eleven-p.m.-to-seven-a.m. shift, or the seven-to-three or three-to-eleven shifts; Larry told her, "No sense both of us being screwed up." So when Larry slept odd hours, she'd watch with the earphone in, sitting on the floor so he could keep the bed unfolded. She didn't know why, but she never sat on Larry's chair.

Every day, every week, has been the same, Maureen thought, as she rinsed off the metal trays before placing them in the rack, then ran the dishrag over the table. *Like a bucket full of water that you can swing around, with the momentum keeping everything inside. I can't pick out a day in the last month—shit, in the last year—that's been radically different.*

They no longer went to the show, that would be taking money away from The House. Bar-hopping was out, too—not that she missed it, but at least they'd see some new people once in a while. Maureen dropped the wrung-out rag into the sink, dried her hands on the slightly grimy towel (Larry eschewed the bar of soap next to the faucets), then made her way into the living room, passing by the garbage bag, which contained the latest jar, camouflaged as

wrapped-up cat droppings.

I can count on the fingers of one hand how many different people I've talked to this week. Wonder if Larry can say the same? She curled up, feet tucked, on the far end of the couch. Her husband blew some smoke her way, until she coughed despite herself.

"Your babies leave you another present this morning?"

For a second, Maureen debated about answering. Pretending to be engrossed in a show she'd seen three times before, she said "No," as noncommittally as possible. She felt as if someone were winding her intestines around a stick, like pasta on a sharp fork, tighter, tighter, just pulling them out of her inches at a time. Just what in hell was so damned fascinating about a crummy baby-food jar? A jar that probably fell out of a grocery bag (*empty*, Maureen?) or got separated from the rest of the junk in the garbage truck (*twice*, Maureen?) or something, anything, *Just let it go, Larry, or I'll ram your cigarettes pack and all up your frigging nose.*

The commercial came on, for a lanolin-impregnated toilet tissue. Reaching for a nail file and an orange, Maureen said, "Larry, we need more t.p. Are they still selling the cases of seconds to you guys?" Using the point of the file like a knife, she scored four lines from pole to pole before peeling the orange. The feel of its skin beneath her nails nauseated Maureen.

"Yeah. You want one case or two?"

"We could stack the boxes in the bedroom, if we can afford two."

Larry ground out his cigarette and lit a fresh one. "I suppose we could. You want anything else? I might as well put it all on one check."

Maureen swallowed the orange segment she had been chewing. "They got more seconds for sale now?"

"Paper towels, disposable diapers, tissue, and paper napkins, I think that 'bout covers it. I can ask how much you gotta buy."

She crammed three segments into her mouth, so she wouldn't be able to reply right away. The s.o.b. knew that they didn't need or want diapers; what made him even mention them? Maybe he was making fun of her baby dream. Larry was never the subtle type. When a long enough time had passed, Maureen said, "See how much a case of paper towels is. Don't buy anything until I check the price at IGA and see if it's a buy."

Larry stiffened the fingers on his right hand and brought them up to his forehead in a brisk salute—"Yes, Mother! Orders received!"

—then relaxed and turned back to the tv.

Pretending she hadn't heard his witticism, she placed the peels on the end table, then curled up more tightly, knees touching her breast, arms crossed high above them under her chin.

It didn't make sense. When you saluted, you never said "Yes, Mother!" you said "Yessir!" or "Orders received!" or "On the double!"—but not "Yes, Mother!" This had to be her fault. She had to go and show him that blasted, fucking *jar*, after her intuition had made her throw it in the trash. But how was she to have known that a second one would appear? It had seemed funny for a short time, but twice in two days wasn't humorous, it was sick. And she had never told anyone about the abortion—*I've got some really big knitting needles*—leastways no one still here in town, not even Mom or Dad. Not that she was close enough to her shadow-behind-the-newspaper father to confide in him, but anyhow, no one here in Ewerton knew, and she had cleaned up her jeans and the rug before Larry came home that day, so he wouldn't suspect—

Larry knew. Somehow, without her telling him, he had psyched her out, keeping quiet about it until yesterday. He resented her not asking him permission to salt baste their kid. So that was it. He knew . . . but how in hell? Maureen had never discussed her periods with him (Larry, who averted his eyes from the Kotex and New Freedom and Stayfree boxes on the store shelf, wasn't into discussing female troubles), and he hadn't been home on the morning when she whoopsed her breakfast and spent the remainder of the day glued to a spinning couch; he had been too worried about bringing home the bucks to notice that his new wife looked much too pale and whacked out. And she had prided herself on her perfect composure, on the way she never let any key words slip during their meals or lovemaking.

But he must have known. Some little word or glance or licking of the lips at the wrong moment must have tipped him off, setting off *his* intuition. What else explained his sudden interest in babies, her not being a mother yet, those disposable diapers (he had no reason to mention those, none *what so ever!*), and those goddamned baby-food jars. Maureen felt crawly little baby fingers ripple along her skin, tiny fingers connected to sucking, drooling babies. . . .

The show broke for a commercial. An actress they both disliked came on, making a smarmy plea for sponsors to take on poor kids overseas.

"Christ, don't that beat all. There's ghetto kids and kids down

in the sticks down South going hungry, and she's asking us to feed the brats in some country we ain't even friendly with." Larry shut up for a few seconds, then resumed his monologue. "'Only fifty-two cents a day, the price of a cup of coffee.' Lady, I ain't got sixteen bucks a month to go giving to some South American brat. Shit, can you figure what that comes to for a fuckin' year?" He took another puff and turned to Maureen. "Can you, huh?"

"I'm no good at math," she whispered, staring at the bloated babies and toddlers on the screen, while the actress said something about "a small hand reaching out."

"That's almost two hundred bucks a year, just so all these Third World rug rats can grow up big and strong and whip our boys' asses come World War Three. Aw, look, they send you pictures of the little pissers along with your sponsor kid, so you feel real sorry and adopt two or three more . . . Lady," he addressed the tv screen, "you should see how I live, then maybe you'll send *me* fifteen-sixty, huh, Maureen?"

Larry couldn't be the only one who knew. She felt as if what she had done was cosmic knowledge; as if every person would slowly turn around when she went outside and point an accusing finger at her, maybe wag it back and forth, or make "shame, shame" gestures at her from behind their car windows. She hadn't realized before that one baby, one blob of tissue smaller than the nail on her little toe, for crying out loud, could come back to haunt her like this. (*Oh, Maureen, don't be an ass about this*, a tiny voice said, but she ignored it.) The next thought made her stiffen: suppose she hadn't aborted the baby that morning. Sure, she'd probably killed it, but that didn't mean she had expelled it. When she had wakened after doing . . . it . . . she hadn't studied her clothes for any tiny nubbin of dead flesh or anything else. After she'd shucked off her clothes for the second time that morning, she'd stepped into the bathtub to shower; there *had* been bright reddish brown twisting DNA spirals of blood flowing down and around her white legs, but no clots and no embryo, at least none that she'd noticed. If anything slid out of her after she turned the water on, it had gotten sucked down the drain, unnoticed and unmourned. Once she'd gotten the blood off her legs and washed the residue out of the tub, Maureen had dressed, cleaned the rug, changed the napkin she'd put on minutes before, scooped up her dirty clothes and washed them uptown, then had come home in plenty of time to fix dinner. Just an average day, a little cleaning, a little cooking, and a

little abortion, no sweat. Better buy a new box of Morton's, though.

The rest of her period had been heavy, but she downed lots of One-A-Day plus Iron tablets, and soon it was all over, and later on she was careful, oh so careful from then on . . . Besides, a year or so later she had read that home abortions are usually botched; the knitting needle goes through the wall of the uterus, or the chemicals burn out the tissues but leave the scalded embryo, and there were usually complications, and sometimes legal action if you happened to get a goody-two-shoes doctor—so if hers was so easy and uncomplicated, wasn't that a sign? If that baby (*my* baby) had been meant to live, to make it, her home-made saline solution wouldn't have worked so well.

But suppose it had been only partially successful? That would mean that she had a dead bit of tissue firmly embedded on the wall of her womb—a minute bump, true, but nonetheless a *something* inside her, just . . . just what? Waiting? No, that couldn't *be*; she'd had dozens of periods since then (and they'd all been on time), so there was nothing inside of her but . . . insides. She hoped.

These dreams are only guilt, she told herself during *Barney Miller*. *And the jars—they're just jars. Remember when you read Ring of Bright Water, how all that shit washed up on the guy's beach? So a lot of garbage must roll up onto people's lawns. Even up the three steps of our porch. That must be it. And the baby . . . well, sorry, kiddo, but you're dead. That's all she wrote. The Blob is dead.*

Forcing herself into a better frame of mind, she watched *Entertainment Tonight* and didn't wince during the Huggies commercial (now wasn't that being a good girl?). And after the show ended, Larry switched on MTV, just catching the shot of the hourly rocket blastoff. When Martha Quinn announced that Michael Jackson's "Thriller" was going to start off the hour, Maureen headed for the bathroom; she'd seen the short feature four times this month alone. Once she attended to business, she stood in the doorway and asked Larry, "Want anything? I'm going in the kitchen."

Michael was sprouting long whiskers while his cute girlfriend in the poodle skirt screamed. Larry said, "Yeah, half of the bucks he's got . . . ah, guess I'll have a beer and some of those taco chips—"

"Can't. All gone."

"Shit. Bring the crackers and the cheese crock, or didja eat that

too?" On the tv, Michael was eating a box of popcorn, chewing with his mouth open; his girl was cringing in the movie seat next to him. Taking her eyes off the screen, Maureen shot back, "No, I didn't, and the taco chips weren't good after December second." By the time she made her sandwich and got out the beers and the cheese crock ("Season's Greetings from Lowell Paper Co."), the undead were chasing Ola Ray into the haunted house. Larry opened a beer, slurped down a good swallow, burped, and said, "After seeing that special about how they made this, it isn't as much fun. Oh, thanks, Maureen. You bring a knife for the cheese?"

When she returned with the knife, Michael was telling Ola, "Come on, I'll take you home," then turned to the camera wearing a big grin and yellow sclera lenses. Maureen handed her husband the knife and said over the credits, "You know, that ending is kinda cruel. I mean, after telling her that it's going to be okay, it turns out that he's gonna kill her or something." She settled down in a corner of the couch to eat her sandwich.

"Aw, it's only a movie!" Larry mimicked, then laughed. "Really, you don't *know* that he's gonna off her."

The baby didn't know either—*stop it!* She took another bite of her turkey bologna on white and gulped it down. A Miller beer commercial came on, and Larry grandly tipped his can of white and black generic beer at the screen. She swallowed and said, "I guess I just expected more for a million bucks, that's all. I suppose it's all right, but I've seen better."

"Like what?" Larry was throwing broken bits of cracker to the cats. She'd have to vacuum tomorrow.

"'Billie Jean' was good, and that 'TV Dinner' one that ZZ Top did—"

"You're the expert on those things."

She overrode him. "—but I like 'Owner of a Lonely Heart' best."

"Yech! That Yes thing where the guy's got worms and spiders and scorpions on him? You, who didn't like the end of 'Thriller'?"

"You forgot the black cat and the lizard. Anyhow, it's Kafkaesque. You know, the guy who wrote—"

"I *know* him, I *know* him, I'm not a total idiot, y'know."

"Who's saying you are? I just wasn't sure if you had—"

Larry snapped the lid of the crock back on and shot back, "Yeah, sure. Nobody's supposed to know about anything but you. If I was home all day, I'd read Kafka too."

"Last time I read him was high school. High school!"

"Nah . . . I thought it was kindergarten." Larry slurped some more beer before continuing, "I'm not really as dumb as I look, I can read when I get the chance."

Finishing her sandwich, Maureen took the plate back into the kitchen. First thing tomorrow, she was going to fish those jars out of the garbage and throw them in the back dumpster at the IGA when she went shopping. They were malign. She wasn't sure what it was about them that was so bad, but it was something. Best to get them out of the house entirely. The garbage wasn't good enough. Maybe then she and Larry would stop this backbiting, this bickering about utterly stupid things like stray garbage on the porch and what they saw on tv at night. Things that never bothered them before. She had read about things giving off bad vibes when she was in junior high, back when she and the friends that weren't her friends anymore used to read *Linda Goodman's Sun Signs* and Joyce Jillson's daily column religiously, in the days when whether or not one's slave-bead necklace was jinxed really mattered, those good old days when the kids pretended that they could see each other's auras, and faithfully wore necklaces of little plastic beads strung on elastic, until suddenly it wasn't the thing to do anymore. Those days were dumb, juvenile, but maybe the "vibes" psychobabble wasn't too far off the mark. No matter what she thought about the jars that someone (something? now, now, Maureen . . .) had dumped on the porch for a joke, it wouldn't hurt to get rid of them.

After finding a clean tumbler in the cupboard (how Larry could drink it straight from the can she didn't know), Maureen rejoined her husband in the living room. "Crumblin' Down" was playing; the video was up to the point where John Cougar Mellencamp was vaulting over the parking meters, then landing in a split. (Larry grumbled "cheater split" to no one in particular.) Looking from the set to Larry, Maureen remarked, "You look a little like him," as she poured half the beer into her glass and waited for the foam to go down.

"Who, him?"

"No, the parking meter."

"You think so?" he asked in peeved tone.

"What's wrong with him?"

"Nothing, but . . ." Larry sighed. "But he's wearing an earring."

"So? One of the guys in Def Leppard has about five in one

ear." She drained her glass.

"But *I* wouldn't wear one of *those*." Now he started to pout.

"I just said you *kind* of looked like him. Around the eyes and mouth."

They watched the end of the song in silence. Then, finally: "I wish I had his money." *Typical, Larry, very typical.*

The beer made her feel giddy. "So go tell 'em you're his long-lost brother and maybe he'll give you some."

Larry threw a cracker at her; she picked it up and lobbed it back, blowing a wet raspberry at him. Feigning great anger, Larry growled, "Them's fighting words," and, after getting up, threw himself on top of her. They rolled around until she slid off the couch in a giggling heap. Reaching down, Larry grabbed her under the armpits and pulled her back on the couch next to him. It felt nice. They hadn't sat on the couch together since . . . since she couldn't clearly remember when. Sometime when Jimmy was still in the White House, or was it after he left? The beer was making her mind fuzzy. *The hell with it*, Maureen thought, as she finished the rest straight from the can, *it doesn't matter when we were here together—we're here now*. Maybe they might forget about the tacit nighttime agreement once they unfolded the bed. Maybe they might . . . She dozed, snuggling in deeply against his shoulder.

Suddenly Larry nudged her awake. "Now *that's* who I look like, and he ain't wearing an earring, either." Groggily she turned her head to the screen. Some guy was playing the electric piano, a blonde with long straggly hair and gold granny glasses. The song was vaguely familiar. She looked at Larry.

"Him? What you been drinking?"

"No, no, no, wait . . . *him*."

Jim Morrison came on, singing "Gloria," a version that Maureen hadn't heard before. Morrison's satin shirt glimmered under the bright lights onstage.

"You're nuts. He's got your hair color, but that's about it. Besides . . ."

She buried her head behind his back, her face brushing the couch cover.

He pulled her out and asked, "Besides what?"

Maureen shuddered. "He's dead. Don't go saying you look like a dead guy, it gives me the creeps." She felt soft warm skin touch her all over, her face, her breasts, and felt the beer-bile backing up her throat.

"He wasn't dead when he made this, stupid. Besides, we're all dead, if you think about it. Right from the time we're conceived we're goners. Just a matter of when, that's all. Nothing to get all riled up about. Hell, it's the only big surprise we got to look forward to."

For Larry, that was heavy. And morbid. She forced herself to swallow the bitter liquid rising up her throat, making the skin ripple on her thighs and arms.

Maureen got up, got the rest of the six-pack, and helped Larry kill it. If she got bombed, maybe she'd sleep like a stone.

Saturday morning. Larry had the day off, so he was still curled next to her when the latest baby dream woke her. Only this time they had been crawling, newborn and really tiny, out from under the covers, but she couldn't remember birthing them, they were covered with bits of blood and sticky residue and trailing their umbilicals like raw tails behind them, making sucking, mewling sounds, eyes aglaze—

Thank God Larry slept hard after a drunk. Carefully she slid out of bed, keeping the covers tight to the bed against drafts, and peeked out the window. The jar was perfectly centered, right on the windowsill, so that the sweet, bloated, glassy-eyed Gerber baby was staring at her. She stuffed her knuckles into her mouth, but a high strangling sound came out anyway. Larry slept through until ten-thirty, long after she had hidden the jar in the trash and had drunk a fast breakfast with Mr. Jack Daniels.

On Sunday morning, the jar was on the doorstep. It fell off and shattered when she opened the storm door, staining the porch floor with residual beet juice. Larry turned over, mumbled, "Tryin' t' get some *sleep*," while Maureen ran quietly for a broom and dustpan . . .

That afternoon Maureen treated Larry to a steak, not chopped and covered with gloopy brown gravy in a metal tray, but fried in a pan (okay, the hash browns were frozen, but Larry loved it anyhow), so Larry took off for town and came back with a six-pack of Bud and a thank-you treat for her: a whole box of her favorite I'll-kill-for-it junk food, Twinkies. Maureen felt giddy, like when they used to date years ago; so to hell with who(what)ever was playing Mickey Mouse games with empty jars. And as for the dreams . . .

Sorry kiddo, I did what I hadda do. No hard feelings, s'right? S'right. For the first time in days she felt good, really good, despite this morning's dream (sticky lines of dried blood where they passed over her) and the broken glass all over the porch. She had a decent guy, a little security, and a whole box of Twinkies. She was actually looking forward to watching tv and not having to go into a panic when a Pampers commercial came on.

Before they turned the radio off, the weather report promised a break in the numbing cold and *snow* for tomorrow; soft, shimmering snow that would cover up the hard pack and show footprints, prints of dogs, people going to their cars, and people who left little gifts on their porch . . . The voice on the radio sounded like a benediction. Her bad mood was going to leave with the cold snap. *Amen.*

There was an old rerun on *Ripley's Believe It or Not!*, but they both liked Jack Palance (Maureen found his voice to be utterly sexy), so they watched anyway, talking over the noise of the tv about little things: Steve's new carpeting in the van, their folks, what kind of cat food made Digger sick that morning. Halfway through, the show broke for a commercial, and Maureen got up, only swaying a bit on her feet. "I've got to go use the litter pan." Even three beers hit her hard, otherwise she never talked cutesy like that. Larry had Digger on his lap and was busy tickling the neuter's soft reddish belly.

When she returned, the commercial was over and Palance's daughter Holly was hosting a segment about water therapy. Digger jumped off Larry's lap and onto hers. Looking down at the cat, she cooed, "Doesn't Daddy rub you right, Digs?" and when she looked at the screen, there was a hugely pregnant woman, naked, in a tank of cloudy water, giving birth to a baby, only the baby was expelled right into the water, where it bobbed about like a cork in a wine bottle, a pale pinkish cork in murky white wine, and Larry was going, "Bleh! How can her old man watch that? I'd be barfing my guts out on the floor—" while Digger kneaded her belly; his blunted claws felt like the baby hands, soft with crescent-shaped hard tiny nails, digging into her face, her breasts; then they were showing lots of babies shooting through the water, as if through a clear womb, just propelling through the watery void, so silent, so fishlike, funny she didn't remember this from the last time they watched the show—odd that it hadn't bothered her then—but they seemed to have purpose, a direction which you wouldn't expect at all from

dumb, pink little babies, babies with someplace to go, something to accomplish—

The Twinkies came shooting back up her throat, hot and bitter, fueled by the Bud. The bile was pressing, pressing, even behind her nostrils. The yellowish, foaming mass came shooting out of her mouth and nose just as she threw the toilet lid up. Maureen held her hair back in a crude ponytail with one hand and hung onto the rim with the other. She tried to shut the door with her foot from where she knelt on the floor, but no go. She could hear Larry anyway.

"Didn't you just go to the can? Maureen, you all right? O.D. on Twinkies? You knocked up? . . . Okay, don't chew my head off, just asked." A merciful pause, as the segment on the show changed. "Hey, Maureen! Remember this? You *gotta* see! They got all these naked Japanese guys running around in the snow, oh you gotta see this—"

After wiping off her face with a cold washcloth, she flushed the toilet and walked back into the living room. This she did remember, a little bit, and it *was* a "gotta see," all these men scurrying through the snow in what must have passed for loincloths in Yotsukaïdo, Japan—they didn't cover *much* loin, though—during something Holly Palance called the "Muddy Naked Festival," and Maureen started laughing so hard the tears kept flowing (she'd been crying as she puked), until the announcer said something about how part of the festival was meant to bless children born that winter, and then Maureen remembered seeing this before, and remembered the babies, little Japanese babies, true, but still babies with those little grasping hands and sucking mouths, and the camera showed a guy carrying one into a rice field—

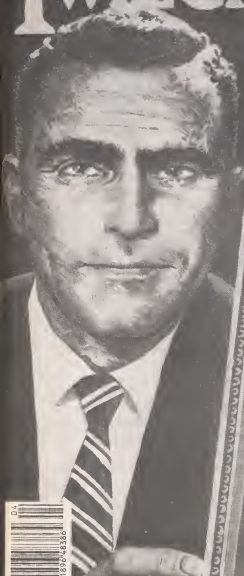
"Maureen! You're missing this! Slippin' around in the mud, drunker than skunks, whoops! there goes one, right on his ass . . . Maureen, you sure picked a dumb time to get the barfs—whoa, there goes another one, now they've all fallen down—"

The babies were dying. She wouldn't let them have any milk, so they were getting thin, thinner, sticklike bones were poking her body, and the flesh didn't just smell milky anymore. Their umbilicals were dried and rough as rope, and they were crying; thin fire-sirens from far, far off. Then that sound ended, too. All she could hear was the dry rasp of their bodies moving slowly away from her across the blanket. Whispery sounds, followed by the plops of their

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bodies as they fell off the bed like overripe spoiling fruit from a withered tree. They landed, one and then another and another, for the cats to fight over, making low growls . . .

Maureen woke slowly this time, the dream reality still superimposed over the real. Next to the bed, the cats were still growling. Slowly she looked over the edge and saw that they were gnawing on the smooth round buttons which decorated the tops of her slippers; nearly eyelike round buttons . . . and she hoped it had snowed.

Damn it, the radio had promised her snow, and she wanted it. Then she'd finally see the footprints of her mysterious admirer, the bringer of her bad dreams. Maureen had to know right *now* if it was a child from another street who thought that the nice young couple with the black car should have a baby that it could maybe baby-sit for in a few years, a kid just having innocent fun, or if it was Mom, Mom who'd been so disappointed when the end of year came without a "visit from the stork," as she'd so coyly put it, Mom, who'd been proved wrong for one damned time in her life. (And even when Mom would've been right, Maureen had been able to prove her wrong through just a little cheating, an especially satisfying win over Mom—hadn't the pain and the bleeding been worth it just to foil Mom's plans, for once?) And if it wasn't Mom or a little kid (maybe the Blonde Bitch had blown back into town), maybe then she'd worry a little—no, *really* worry, but please, please let the radio be right, let it have snowed.

Throwing back the white top sheet, she hurried to the window. The shade flew up and smacked around the roller. Maureen let out a tiny squeal of joy, a Christmas morning sound, when she saw the feathery white flakes floating thickly down. The wind angled the snow across the floor of their porch, where it made a coating thick enough to show Larry's single line of footprints, going straight across the porch and down the sidewalk to the car. She could see every footprint clearly under the ten—no, a dozen at least—baby-food jars, all of them shattered, the paper labels torn and curled with age, the lids strewn about like a huge child's tiddledywinks game.

Just Larry's footprints, no others, only his on the porch, and on the sidewalk.

Except for the small, fluttery marks. They could have been birds, or the fragile legs of a starfish in the wrong kind of water.

When Larry came home that afternoon, Maureen hadn't taken the mail out of the box, nor did she answer his repeated knocks.

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The shade was up, so she had to be up too. Digging through his pockets for his keys, Larry noticed that the floor of the porch was coated with shards of broken glass under a thick batting of snow; it crunched unpleasantly under his boots. He could dimly make out the skid lines where the mailman must have slipped on it. Muttering "What the fuck's goin' on?" he fitted the key into the lock.

The unmade bed nearly touched the open door. The cats were huddled together on the end table, staring at his wife. Maureen was curled up on the floor, knees touching her breasts, under the tv. She was still in her soiled pj's, matted hair covering her face, just staring at the unfolded bed. All she'd say when he kept shaking her and begging her to tell him please tell him what had happened was, "Issa empty, jawr all *empty*," as she kept staring at the dull silver lid pressed tightly in her bloodied fingers.

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